

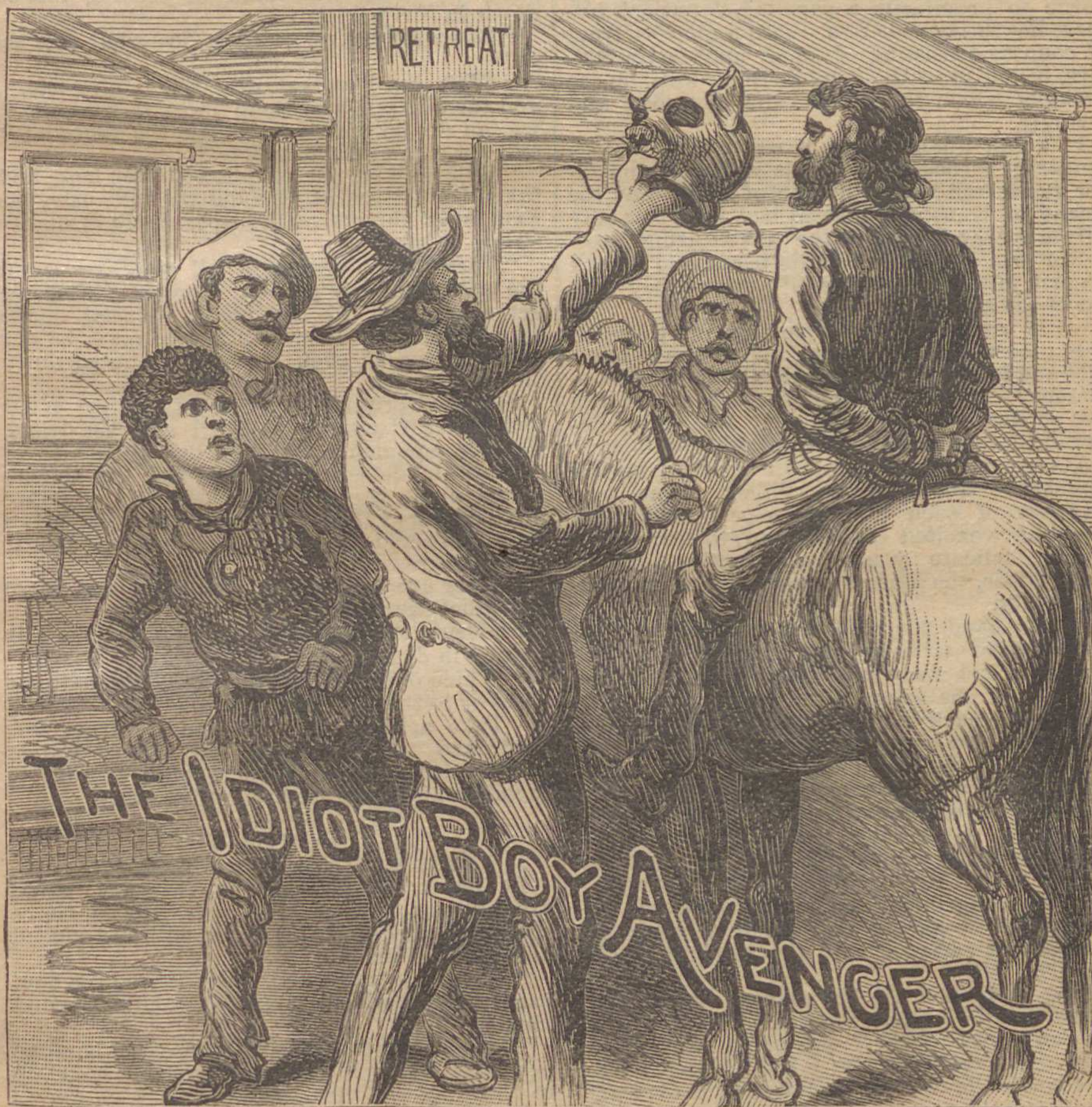
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No. 277. \$2.50
a Year.

Published Weekly by Beadle and Adams,
No. 98 WILLIAM ST., NEW YORK.

Price, Five Cents. Vol. XXII.



WITH HIS KNIFE THE DOCTOR CUT THE FASTENINGS OF THE MASK, REVEALING THE PALE BUT DETERMINED FEATURES OF COOL DESMOND.

The Idiot Boy Avenger;

OR,

CAPTAIN WILD-CAT'S BAND.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,

AUTHOR OF "THE LION OF THE SEA," "SOL GINGER," "THE TWO DETECTIVES," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE FUGITIVES AND THE WARNING.

AWAY up among the head-waters of the Rio Grande del Norte, that famous river that has borne so prominent a part in our nation's history, lies the famous San Juan region—a tract of country consisting of small and fertile valleys, belted in with cloud-piercing hills, on the peaks of which the white snow lies long and lovingly.

This San Juan region is really a marvelous country; surpassingly rich is it in gold and silver veins; and yet, so difficult of access, and the means of transportation so bad that it is only within a very few years the adventuring prospector has penetrated to its heart and struck his pick into the rich "leads" which fairly crop out of the ground.

Little settlements grew up here and there, as rich mines were discovered, and of one of these wild and lonely camps we are about to write—of the "city" of Juanapolis, situated at the foot of Death Valley—and well the valley deserved that name, as the reader will see anon.

Along a rocky, narrow trail high up in the mountains, above Death Valley, came two travelers of such peculiar aspect that they would have excited attention anywhere; one, a fragile, delicate youth, apparently near to death's door, the other a young girl of surpassing beauty.

In her hand she carried a short-barreled repeating rifle, and to the belt that encircled her almost perfect waist two holsters hung. In the other hand she grasped the lariat of the mule upon whose back the youth was seated.

In person the boy strongly resembled the girl; he was clad in rough and shabby garments, much the worse for wear, and he had the same peculiar eyes and hair; but the hair, although exactly the same color, grew differently, and twined in little clustering curls all over the shapely head. He was evidently much younger than his companion, and upon his face an expression of weakness and timidity appeared, strangely at variance with the resolute look of the girl.

Ever and anon the boy glanced behind him, with a shuddering fear written on his face.

"Can't you hurry?" he would exclaim on these occasions, piteously; "I think that I hear the sound of horses' hoofs clattering behind us."

"It is only your imagination," she would reply, endeavoring to assume a cheerful, careless expression, although she never failed to glance anxiously behind her every time the boy spoke.

"It is nothing; for a week nearly, in fact, ever since we started, you have been haunted by the idea of pursuit."

"But where are we going? You have not told me yet," the other observed, complainingly.

"Heaven only knows, for I do not," the girl replied. "I can only tell you that we ought to be now in the San Juan region, for that is the trail I have followed. It is wild, desolate and very thinly settled, but I know there are little mining-camps scattered through its valleys, and I am in hopes this trail will conduct us to one of these."

"And, even if we reach a mining-camp, what then?"

"What then? Is it not shelter and safety? Are we not nearly two hundred miles away from our foes? Who will think of looking for us down in this wild land?"

"But what are we going to do—what *can* we do?"

"Wait until we get into the mining-camp, and then we will see; there must be some work we can do, no matter how little the place is; it will not cost us much to live."

"But, may we not be followed even here, and taken back?" the other inquired, anxiously, the thought of pursuit and recapture still evidently strong in his mind.

"There is no danger, I tell you," reassured the girl, strangely patient; "besides, after we get acquainted in the place, we shall make friends, and the miners will not be apt to let our enemies take us, even if we are hunted down and discovered."

Strange words from such beautiful lips! What had this surpassingly fair girl and her feeble, sickly companion done that they should dread pursuit and detection, and had fled, like thieves in the night, through this lonely and wild San Juan country? That is a question easier asked than answered, as the reader will see as our story progresses.

Darker grew the gloom, and more and more indistinct the trail.

Suddenly the trail split in twain and the pair paused in doubt.

"Which one shall we take—shall we go to the right or to the left?" the girl queried.

"Take neither, but turn and fly from this wild land where nothing but misery awaits you!" cried a hoarse voice, coming, seemingly, from the air above the head of the pair.

CHAPTER II.

THE SPIRIT OF THE MOUNTAIN.

IN blank amazement the travelers gazed around them, striving with their eyes to pierce the gloom which, like a funeral pall, surrounded and hemmed them in.

"What was that—who spoke?" asked the boy, in a trembling whisper, glancing fearfully around him.

The rider was so terribly alarmed that he came near fainting, and it was as much as he could do to retain his seat upon the mule.

But the girl, being made of stouter stuff, had in a measure recovered from her first alarm, and this time she had located the voice.

Whoever spoke was concealed just above the

heads of the two in the little clump of pines, in the middle of which grew the spreading mountain sycamore.

In a twinkling the rifle of the girl was at her shoulder, the hammer drawn back and the muzzle pointed at the group of pines.

"Man or spirit—friend or foe, whichever you are, show yourself or I will try the virtue of a bit of lead upon you!" she cried, defiantly, and there was that in the eyes of the girl which told that she would certainly be as good as her word.

And so thought the unseen speaker who was concealed in the tree, and who for a half-hour or more had been trailing the pair along the top of the rocky cliffs, taking good care to keep out of sight and yet quite near enough to overhear their conversation.

He nothing doubted that the girl would fire if he did not make his appearance, and so, like Captain Scott's coon, he "came down."

As sudden and surprising as had been his mysterious warning so was his appearance, and the pair fairly started as he bounded from the shelter of the tree. Down he came, clinging with one hand to a bending branch, and with his feet braced against the side of the cliff he swung in the air like a huge monkey, which, indeed, he greatly resembled.

The "spirit of the mountain" was a great, overgrown boy, with a savage, animal-like face, upon which, too, there appeared a look of low cunning. He was clad in skins from head to foot—all sorts of skins from all sorts of animals, big and little, curiously patched together, and many of them much the worse for wear.

The travelers started back as the unknown came bouncing down, and even the patient, sorely-wearied mule shied to one side at the unexpected apparition.

The girl opened her eyes widely as she beheld the unknown, and she still kept her rifle ready for action as though she distrusted the purpose of the uncouth being.

"Here I am, mistress, and what do you want with me?" the unknown asked, still clinging like an ape to the limb of a tree.

It was a human, after all, although at first both of the travelers were in doubt in regard to it.

"Nay, it is for us to question," the girl replied. "Who are you, and what do you want, and why do you drop warning words from the very clouds, as it were, down upon our heads?"

"Because you are not suited for this country. Go back; such as you are not wanted here!" the strange being answered, swinging himself in the air by means of the limb.

"What know you of us and why do you deny us a right to seek our fortune here?" the girl exclaimed, spiritedly.

"I know more than you think; I know that you have fled in the night, and that angry foes have tracked you hard and close, but the foes you have succeeded in leaving behind are nothing to the ones you will encounter if you keep on in the direction in which you are going."

"And in what direction are we going?" asked the girl, abruptly. "Here are two paths, one to the right, the other to the left; which one will we take?"

"The one to the right," the nondescript answered, without a moment's hesitation.

"And whither will that lead us?"

"Up into the mountains, and if you follow it long enough, into the Mormon land."

The girl made a gesture of impatience.

"But we are in the San Juan country, are we not?" the girl asked, anxiously.

"You are, and the worse luck for you, for you couldn't be in a worse place."

Truly, this fellow was a Job's comforter.

"But there are mining-camps near at hand?" and the girl peered before her as if she expected to see the welcome lights shining through the mantle of the gloom.

"There is one camp near—one only."

"And how may we get there?"

"Take the other trail—the one to the left;" and the fellow grinned maliciously as he spoke.

Despite her patient, quiet nature the indignation of the girl flamed forth.

"Why, you saucy fellow, you have been playing with us!" she exclaimed. "Why did you not say so at first?"

"Because I am a prophet and can look into the future!" replied the fellow, grandiloquently.

"I see danger—dark and horrible danger threatening you if you descend into yonder valley."

"What valley is it?" the girl asked, paying very little attention now to the wild and wandering speech of the other, because she believed that he was of unsound mind and therefore not responsible for his words.

"Death Valley!"

Again an exclamation of alarm came from the lips of the boy and an anxious expression appeared upon the girl's features.

"Death Valley?" she murmured; "what an ominous name."

"So it is, and so it has been called ever since the dark hour that witnessed the massacre of Conejos," the nondescript chanted, in dismal tones.

This time it was a shrill scream that broke from the lips of the boy, and the girl was so affected that she staggered back, and with her hand pressed to her heart looked with staring eyes upon the skin-clad man.

"Oho!" he cried, in strange glee, "I thought I recognized you—I thought you knew all about it; and that is why I told you to take the other trail. Better seek shelter with the wild red-men than to take up your abode in Death Valley, where the unquiet ghosts of the massacred still linger."

"Oh, let us turn and fly!" exclaimed the boy; "evil fortune pursues us."

"No, we will go on!" the girl replied, firmly, with a great effort recovering her firmness. "What is this valley to us? We are strangers and know nothing of it, nor of those who have ever dwelt therein. It is fate that has directed our steps this way, and it is useless to battle against fate. We will go on. Will you guide us?"

With a hoarse cry the animal-like fellow dropped from his perch on the wall to the rocky trail.

"I will; come on then; and if black murder or foul-faced despair seizes upon you hereafter for this action, remember that I warned you and you would not listen. Come for Juanapolis!"

CHAPTER III.

THE FUTURE METROPOLIS OF SOUTHERN COLORADO.

JUANAPOLIS had grown up, a "right smart place" for a camp only six months old, for that was all the age the town boasted. Seven months before the prairie-wolf had howled and the jack-ass rabbit had gamboled on the very spot where its main street now stood—not only the main but the only street. It ran parallel with the river, as the inhabitants proudly termed the little creek, one of the head-waters of the Rio Grande, alongside of which the town had grown up.

There were only twenty or thirty houses in the place, counting shanties and tents alike, but in the foot-hills near at hand were quite a number of cabins here and there, the inhabitants of which claim kindred with the town.

There were three principal buildings in the city that loomed out prominently above the smaller shanties by which they were surrounded.

The first was the hotel, "Tenderfoot Rest," as it was aptly called. In wild Western parlance a "tenderfoot" is a new-comer, a greenhorn, a pilgrim from the East. The second, a general store, that supplied the wants of the miners, and sold everything from a needle to a complete ten-stamp mill. The third, the drinking-saloon and gambling-den combined, which boldly called itself "The Desperado's Den."

Desmond was the owner's name, not Tom Desmond, nor Bob Desmond, nor Desmond Smith, or Desmond White, but simply Desmond.

He was anything but a desperado in appearance, and yet Juanapolis had seen the time when in deadly fight he had single-handed stood up against a crowd and driven them all out of his saloon.

As more than one brawny giant had remarked, who had presumed upon the appearance of the man, and had discovered to his cost that he was a chief of note:

"He don't look it, stranger, but when you git him started he kinder seems to swell up until he weighs nigh a ton, an' ef you don't believe jis' try it on, that's all!"

The landlord of the hotel, too, on his part, was just as strange and odd a character as the keeper of the opposition place, for really the hotel depended almost altogether upon its bar-trade, for travelers were few and far between, although the hotel had a few permanent boarders that helped it to keep up.

"The Doctor" the landlord was called and Juanapolis had never known him by any other name.

He had come down into the valley alone and by night—no man knew from where or whence—and just the first kind of a *ruction* was going on in the hotel. The then proprietor, a rather hasty-tempered Irishman, had got into a fierce quarrel with some of the miners from up the creek, and a terrible row had followed, weapons were freely used, and the landlord was badly hurt.

The cry went up for a doctor, but there wasn't one within the valley; then the stranger stepped forward and tendered his services, and

after he set to work upon the wounded man the bystanders quickly saw that he was not only a doctor, but, as one of them expressed it "a rip-staving one, too!"

Despite the care and attention which he received the landlord died, for his wounds were mortal, and it was not within the power of man to cure them.

In gratitude, though, for the care which had been bestowed upon him by the stranger, who couldn't have attended to him more closely and carefully if he had been his own brother, the landlord bequeathed to the doctor the hotel, which he accepted.

Some time after this, in a gossipy mood one night, a miner remembered that no one had ever learned the doctor's name. They had always called him "The Doctor" and nothing more, and boldly he made question.

The doctor drew up his tall, stately form—he was a splendid-looking man of middle age, with a full brown beard, and nearly six feet high—and said, pleasantly:

"My dear young friend, don't ask questions, because, if you do, I shall be compelled to confess that my name is John Smith—that I poisoned sixteen men in the East, and that there is a reward of ten thousand dollars for my apprehension."

In the San Juan region no greater breach of manners can be committed than to put imprudent questions in regard to a man's name and where he hails from, for, truth to tell, many of these honest miners are unlucky men who have left their country (State) for their country's good.

The Doctor never was troubled about his name after that.

There was little law and much license in this growing camp, and yet the inhabitants got on pretty well together. Once in a while, though, a stranger would come in and make trouble, as one big six-foot giant did only a short time before the period of which we write.

He was a large fellow, a "regular burster," and for a time he rather cowed the boys with his talk, and they kept clear of him. He was Robert Ridley—Ole Bob Ridley O! he said—the feller w'ot the song was write about; he was a chief—a humped-back elephant—a wide-eared wild-cat, and various other strange animals, and finally declared himself the Tearing Terror of Taos, but at last he "r'iled" the crowd.

"How do yer call this ranch, Juanapolis! Oh, you mud-colored gophers w'ot can't spit Spanish—I kin—I kin come the lingo; it's Wanapolis and be blessed to you!"

This was more than the crowd could stand, and as one man they sailed into the stranger. He fought like a Trojan, bit and clawed and swore, but, maddened by the insult, the crowd was too much for him; they got him down and pounded him, then they dragged him down to the creek and soused him, holding his head under the water until he was nearly drowned, and when at last they let him up, blowing like a porpoise, the Doctor sternly put the question:

"What is the name of this camp?"

"Wan—" he commenced, but as the rough hands seized him he wilted, not exactly took water, because he had already taken all the

water that he could conveniently hold. "Let up, boys; give a man a chance—Juanapolis!"

And into this strange camp, amid the rude, rough men, with the coming of the night, came that girl of marvelous beauty, and a beautiful woman in a mining camp is a firebrand to stir up distraction.

CHAPTER IV.

A STRANGE DISGUISE.

It was about nine in the evening when the uncouth guide conducted the travelers from the rocky trail on the hillside down into Death Valley and through the single street of the mining-camp, halting at last in front of the general store, which was situated right between the Tenderfoot's Rest and the Desperado's Den.

Great was the excitement, when the nondescript clad in skins came marching down the street, conducting the travelers, and halted with them in front of the general store, which by the way, was kept by a father and son, in general repute two of the "whitest" and nicest men in the valley. Thomas Shannon the father was called, a big, overfat man, with a broad, good-natured face, fringed with silver whiskers, and which somehow reminded one strangely of a full moon. The son was also tall and well-built, and in his honest face, lit up by a pair of keen blue eyes, perfect honesty and good faith might be read.

The advent of a circus, brass band and all, or of a caravan of wild animals, could not have more amazed the crowd than did this little procession.

The nondescript was no stranger to them, being a well-known town character, but the boy upon the back of the mule, with pale, frightened face, and eyes that trembled as they gazed around, and the girl so strangely attired, so oddly armed, and so surpassingly beautiful, caused the men of Juanapolis to gape with wonder.

There was but one other woman in Death Valley, and, although several of the miners, pining for female society, had essayed to cultivate her acquaintance, each and every attempt had been a sad failure, as, in due course of time, we shall describe at length.

"You seek Juanapolis!" the nondescript exclaimed. "Behold! I bring ye to the town, but here you will find naught but misery, despair and death!" And with this somewhat startling announcement, the boy galloped wildly away.

The miners, acquainted with his strange humors did not attempt to stop him, and the girl, noticing this, guessed that she was right when she had come to the conclusion that the wits of the skin-clad being were out of order.

About the only one of the crowd who seemed to have any sense, and could do anything but stare at the strangers, was young Shannon, for he advanced to accost the girl.

"You must not mind him, miss," he said, noticing that the ominous words of the nondescript had caused a shade of sadness to appear on the face of the girl; "he does not know what he says; he is not in possession of his right senses."

"So I supposed, sir," answered the maid, her

low, sweet voice, so silvery clear in its tones, falling upon the delighted ears of the entranced miners like so many notes of softest music. "We met him on the trail above, and he volunteered to conduct us to the town."

The miners opened their ears wide at this. The superb creature, then, was coming to their town, and had not found her way there by accident; and one and all of the throng in his heart of hearts hoped that she had come to stay.

Upon every face that met her eyes admiration or curiosity was written, but not one of them expressed hostility.

Shannon noticed the look, but misunderstood its object.

"Perhaps you are looking for friends, miss," he hastened to say, and at the same time he was vainly cudgeling his brain trying to guess what man in the camp of Juanapolis could have any possible relation with this beautiful stranger.

"Friends!" the girl echoed, absently, and again she looked around, as though seeking for a friendly face.

"You expected some one here to meet you?"

"No, I did not expect any one," she replied, simply. "I do not know any one here. My brother and I are all alone in the world, and we came here to seek our fortune."

The crowd were astounded, and they looked at each other with wondering eyes.

No friends—nothing but chance to bring this splendid creature to their midst. Well, Juanapolis was in luck, that was all! This was the general sentiment.

Shannon, for the moment, was bothered; he looked at the crowd and the crowd looked at him; they saw that he was in difficulty, but no one volunteered to help him out. In fact, if the prevailing sentiment had been expressed in words—he had taken it upon himself to boss the job, now, fight it out.

And the girl stood looking at him with her beautiful eyes as though her fate lay in his hands.

"Well, miss," he said, at last, perceiving that all expected him to do the speaking, "as you haven't got any friends, I suppose we men of the town ought to look out for you and see that you are made comfortable."

"There's Johnny Trainor's little cabin right at the end of the street by the creek; he is away and won't be back for six months. I've the key, and he told me that I might use the cabin if I wanted to; it is all furnished, stove, bunks, everything; and I reckon there is some leetle provisions there, too. Now you are heartily welcome to it, miss, if it will be any accommodation to you."

Heartfelt indeed were the thanks the girl poured forth.

"And to-morrow I'll get the citizens together and we'll see what we can do for you."

"Oh, sir, you are so kind!" and tears stood in the beautiful eyes.

As one man, the "gang," escorted the strangers to Johnny Trainor's cabin, and after seeing them comfortably bestowed, left them. As Shannon had said—nothing was wanting.

After a frugal meal, the two prepared to retire to rest, for they were fatigued after their long journey.

"First to bar the door," said the maid, but, as she advanced to it, it was suddenly flung open, and a tall figure, clad completely in black, and wearing upon its shoulders a huge cat's grinning head, stalked into the apartment.

"Not a word—not a sign of alarm, or you die on the instant!" cried the intruder.

CHAPTER V.

CAPTAIN WILD-CAT.

DOWN upon his knees, in an agony of fear, went the boy, the heart's action almost stilled by the cold hand of terrible fear, and even the girl, bold of heart and full of courage as she was, grew pale as death, and staggered back in alarm at the overpowering terror inspired by this horrible thing.

Of course it was a human—a man, but the disguise was a fearful one, for all that.

From head to heel, he was clad in a close-fitting black suit, composed of cloth that closely resembled a cat's skin, and with the gigantic cat's head fixed firmly upon the shoulders, at a short distance, at the first glance, one would never have taken the figure to be a man in disguise, but, on the contrary, a gigantic cat—a black cat of colossal size.

So overcome by terror was the girl at the horrible and unexpected sight, that she could only stand, statue-like, with straining eyes, and gaze awestruck upon the fearful form.

Again the apparition repeated the warning.

"Not a word—not a sign of alarm, or you die on the instant!"

"I will not speak—I will not attempt to give an alarm," the girl gasped.

"And you, young cub, do you understand?"

The boy was so much under the influence of fear that he could hardly move, but he managed to stammer out a reply, although he might as well have spared himself the trouble, for there was no sense to his words.

"And now, what brings you here? Speak truthfully or you die!" the unknown questioned, in a threatening tone.

"It is by accident that our footsteps came this way; we merely seek a place where we may live," the girl replied, with perfect truth.

But the man in the disguise of the cat did not believe her, though candor itself sat on her brow.

"You are speaking falsely, and I know it!" he exclaimed, in harsh and angry tones. "Do not think to deceive me, for it is not possible. Do you know who I am?"

"Indeed, I do not!"

"I am Captain Wild-cat, and I have written my name in blood in every mining-camp from Canyon City southward; nor am I alone, either; I command a band of a dozen trusty men, each one as merciless and as bloodthirsty as the cat whose head he wears. I have watched you from the moment you first struck southward into this trail, and I know the errand upon which you come, the prize which you seek."

The girl was greatly amazed at this strange declaration, the meaning of which was a most decided mystery to her.

"I do not know what you mean; you speak in riddles!" she replied, evidently bewildered, or, if the ignorance was assumed instead of

real, then in truth was she a most finished actress.

"A single word will explain—a word that you know well enough—a name, Conejos!"

The face of the girl was as pale as the face of a marble statue, and for a moment it seemed as if the very beatings of her heart were stilled, but, by a wonderful effort, she kept her agitation from being apparent. The boy fainted dead away the moment the name reached his ears, but, as he had been extended at full length upon the ground, with his face pressed close to the floor, neither one of the others noticed the effect which the name produced upon him.

Slowly the girl shook her head.

"What is the name to me?" she asked, "and what has it to do with this place?"

"You know well enough!" the disguised man returned, angrily, "but I see that you are determined to pretend ignorance. Be it so; it matters not; but you have had fair warning; I would not strike without a caution, but now, from this time forth, be on your guard. If you attempt to progress one single step toward the point you have in view, then not all the powers of this world will be able to save you from my vengeance; be warned in time, and turn aside from your purpose ere it is too late!"

And as suddenly as he had appeared, the mysterious being threw open the door and disappeared.

"In Heaven's name what is the meaning of all this?" the maiden cried, in great astonishment, kneeling by the side of the boy and endeavoring to restore him to consciousness.

But this was destined to be a night of surprises, for, down out of the big chimney where he had evidently been concealed, dropped the idiot boy, much to the terror of the girl, who rose in alarm at this new intrusion.

"Bar the door! bar the door!" he cried; "are you mad that you do not bar the door? He may come back!"

The thought was a wise one and at once the girl proceeded to bar the door.

"Ha, ha! that's good! Now we can talk at our leisure without being disturbed!" croaked the strange being, rubbing his hands briskly together and then holding them out before him as if he was warming them over an imaginary fire.

"I was up the chimney and overheard all that he said. I knew that he would come, and now that you have seen Captain Wild-cat, the captain of all the Wild-cats, what do you think of him? Wasn't I right when I told you to take the upper trail and warned you not to come near this town?"

"But, why should he seek me out—what have I done to him—what have I ever done to anybody that I should be thus persecuted?" cried the girl, in a sudden outburst.

"Oh, ho, ho, ho!" laughed the idiot; "you make believe first-rate; I couldn't do it any better myself; but, you see, he knew you—he recognized you as I did when I met you on the mountain trail, and he feared that you have come to tear away the prize which only a little while ago he sold his soul to the devil to gain; but he didn't get it, and that is where the laugh comes in. Oh, it was a terrible deed of blood,

I think that I see them now, every man with the terrible cat's head on—every man bearing gleaming steel in his hand, and the red-mouthed dogs of war; there were thirteen of them—thirteen red-handed marauders, and at night they steal by me when I am alone in the mountain canyons, but I am afraid to say anything to them, for I know not whether they are men, beasts or devils," and then the idiot rocked himself mournfully to and fro, crooning to himself after the fashion of the death-keepers at an old-time Irish wake.

To the girl's memory came the words that Shannon had uttered. The idiot had a sad history, and his thoughts dwelt continually on blood and slaughter.

But, what had this to do with her? and why, in this strange place, should an enemy start up at once with threatened words the very moment she entered it?

"Good-by!" cried the nondescript, suddenly, rising to his feet, going to the door and unbaring it: "I must go and look after the Cats, and see what other mischief they are up to. Don't you be frightened; since you *would* come to this camp, I will look after you. You must kill the Cats if you have a chance," and then he passed out into the night and was gone.

These were strange things for the first night in the mining-camp.

CHAPTER VI.

DEAD IN HIS TRACKS.

THE arrival of the travelers, so entirely unexpected and so utterly unlike any party of tenderfoots, was destined to mark an era in the history of Juanapolis.

But now the Taosite and his *Wanapolis* was clean forgotten and beauty ruled the madness of the hour.

Two men in the town did not share in the general rejoicing, although they profited most by the excitement, and they were so busy that the absence of their expression of satisfaction was not noticed, and those two were the Doctor, the host of the Tenderfoot's Rest, and silent, white-faced Desmond, the Desperado—Cool Desmond.

Both the men were too wise to say anything, though, when they saw how strong the popular tide was running in favor of the girl, although both fully and firmly believed that they saw evil in the future springing from her appearance in the town.

The saloons generally kept open until twelve, and sometimes, when gambling was running high, until one, but on this night of which we write there was very little play going on; for once, cards had lost their attraction.

The miners were too busy talking over the new arrivals and discussing what was the proper thing for the town to do in the case, for Juanapolis believed that in a measure she was responsible for the well-doing and the safe-keeping of the two waifs that a mysterious Providence had safely conducted over the rude and rocky trail to the wild and lonely Death Valley.

The brother and sister—for, without questioning, the town had jumped to the conclusion that they were such—were without father or mother,

or other natural protectors; *ergo*, Juanapolis then must be father and mother to the helpless wanderers, who, like straws drifting with the tide, had come into her confines.

And for the honor of the town, Juanapolis must do the "clear white thing" by them.

It was two in the morning before the last stragglers got out of the saloons, and walked with unsteady steps to bed.

The moon had come out about twelve, a misty, uncertain moon such as the idiot boy had described and detested for its pranks.

The misty light enabled the miners to get home in safety; the misty light also gave a chance to the secret assassin who, with blood-thirsty passion, prowled through the silent, sleeping town.

A single short, sharp, quick pistol-bark, not loud enough to wake the sleepers in the neighboring cabins—quite loud enough to warn the victim that danger was near, but the warning was not in time to save him from the leaden missile.

Down went the man, killed outright on the instant, full in the center of the street, and there he lay until the gray light of the dawn tinged the eastern skies.

Naturally, the dead body stretched out in the middle of the street, attracted instant attention.

The cry went up and soon rung through the town:

"Foul play, boys! Bloody murder has been stalking in the dark, and here lies the victim."

The body was recognized at once as that of Tom Kirby—Tom Cod, as generally called, because he was from the East, had been a fisherman on the "Grand Banks" at one time, and was always boasting of his fishing exploits.

Tom Cod, to relate the exact and simple truth, was no credit to the town; he was a drunkard and a gambler in the worst sense of the words.

That such a man should have enemies was no wonder; and that some foe should waylay him was no wonder either, for, upon examination, it was made apparent that he had been killed by some secret foe, for his money was on his person, his weapons were intact, so that robbery had not been the motive for the deed.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MOUNTAIN BAND.

THREE miles above Death Valley lies the wildest and most rugged part of the territory of Colorado, ragged rocks and ragged cliffs—a region almost impassable except for the sure-footed mountain goat, or the agile red-skin, trained from early childhood to traverse the pathless wilderness and find a way amid the canyons.

Three miles from the town of Juanapolis, due northward, was a canyon so deep and dark and dreary that even the adventuring miners shrunk from penetrating into it. The rough, rude men of Juanapolis had aptly named it, as many a similar gorge of unearthly aspect has been named in the West, the Devil's Canyon, and some of the dwellers in the mining-camp who were fond of telling big yarns, calculated to excite a listener's wonder, would often declare that they had

peered into the Devil Canyon when passing by it.

Taos's Terror had heard these tales and had laughed them to scorn. "Nothing but bullfrogs!" he had declared; and he further added that down whar he had come from, in Southern Arizona, he had seen bullfrogs so large that the red bucks used to skin them, sew up their hides and use them for boats to ferry themselves and plunder across the river, a yarn which called forth the remark from an incredulous bystander that that was the biggest lie he had ever heard—an insinuation which the Taos man instantly challenged by asserting that he could tell a dozen bigger.

But, whether the miners believed the canyon to be haunted ground or not, one and all gave the locality a pretty wide berth, particularly after nightfall. True, not one of them would own up to a belief in devils, ghosts and such like uncanny things, yet, there was no telling, and they "wouldn't take any of the canyon in theirs, thank you."

It was near the "shut of day," and the gloom of the twilight beginning to gather along the crests and sides of the rocky peaks and to descend into the valley, made the dark interior of the canyon almost ink-like in its gloom.

But, dark as were the shadows that dwelt within the canyon's bosom, there were sounds there that denoted life.

A dark form had left the mountain trail and had glided, specter-like, into the great rift, the dense gloom of which soon swallowed up the figure.

But along it went, with no uncertain steps, but as if quite sure of the way. A hundred yards from the mouth of the canyon the figure paused, looked carefully behind as if it were afraid of being followed and wished to be sure that it was not, then, picking up a loose rock which lay near at hand, pounded with it upon the wall which formed the side of the cliff on the west.

And then, wonderful sound for such a place, the low me-ow of a cat came from the interior.

The new-comer answered the challenge, for such it evidently was, with a second me-ow, again casting a careful glance around him, to be sure that he was not watched.

The scrutiny was apparently a useless one, and the man who made it felt that it was so; yet, as he had always been accustomed so to do, by force of habit he did not omit it.

But on this occasion there was need of it; there was a watcher on the trail of the dark figure, although the latter's eyes were not keen enough to detect it in the gloom which shrouded the canyon like a funeral pall.

The spy was not discovered, his presence not even suspected, for long security had lulled suspicion into sleep, and the new-comer, after answering the signal, stooped down and crawled into what was apparently a small, hollow depression in the wall of the cliff, right on the level of the ground, but as he advanced the interior wall of the cavity seemed to retreat before him, and soon his entire figure disappeared within the hole.

After the man had passed, the giant rock

"teetered" back to its original place, blocking the passage so completely and securely that he would have been a wise man indeed who guessed what lay beyond the stone.

And what was beyond?

The man found himself in a narrow, vault-like apartment, the gloom lit up by a single candle stuck into a niche in the wall, but so inadequate was the light against the deep gloom that it was as much as one could do to make out the surrounding objects.

A man wearing the strange cat disguise sat by the rock—evidently a sentinel posted to guard the entrance, as it was he who had answered to the new-comer's demand for admission.

By the side of the sentinel was a cat's head and the other garments that went to make up the disguise. With these the man proceeded to equip himself.

"Have they all come?" he asked.

"Yes, all are within but one."

"One missing?"

"Yes, that is all; but you are late to-day; it is nearly night."

"I had an idea that I was being followed."

"Followed! Blazes! who would follow you?"

"That is the puzzle; but I am sure some one tracked me from the town, although I can't understand why any one should take the trouble."

"Do you s'pose any one suspects?"

"How can it be possible? But I am sure some one was playing the spy upon me. Keep a good lookout, and see if any one comes into the canyon; it means mischief if any one does."

Then the man, having finished dressing, passed from the vault through a narrow winding passage, and in a few steps came to a second vaulted chamber which was of considerable extent. The floor was of sand, silver white, and the vaulted apartment ran upward in the shape of a sugar-loaf, and through the narrow aperture at the top a small ray of light came, proving that there was an entrance to the cave from the mountain above.

The outlaws—for such of course the inhabitants of the cave were, for honest men had no use for such a strange abode—had provided a means of escape by the roof in case they should be assailed by an overpowering force from the canyon. From the upper region a stout rope descended, until it came within about six feet of the floor, and the rope was knotted at regular intervals so that it could be used as a ladder, and readily climbed by an ordinarily agile man in case of an emergency.

Ten men were assembled in the cave, seated on skins spread on big boulders, and some lying out at full length. All were dressed exactly alike, and all looked like huge cats.

When the new-comer entered, the rest all got up and saluted him, he being evidently the chief.

The patch of light that came in by the way of the hole in the roof was not strong enough to illuminate the gloom of the cave-chamber even when the sun was at its full height and power, and therefore a bunch of lighted candles fastened to a stick which was stuck in the sand like a torch, faintly dispelled the darkness.

The chief counted the Cats.

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, and the sentinel outside is eleven and I am twelve," he said. "We lack another, for we number thirteen in our band—thirteen Wild-cats, good and true. Where is the thirteenth Cat?"

The members of the band looked at each other a moment in doubt and then one and all shook their heads.

"You don't know, eh? It is a conundrum and you give it up? Do you all 'pass?'"

And they all nodded as much as to signify that they couldn't "ante up" in this game.

"I'll tell you where he was this morning, and then you will know the reason why he is not here now!" the Wild-cat leader exclaimed, with savage earnestness. "When the sun got out of his bed this day its first beams fell on our pard, lying cold and still, with a bullet-hole in his head, right in Juanapolis. Tom Cod was our man, one of the earliest members of our band and one who shrunk from nothing. Now the question is, who killed him? Was it private personal vengeance, or is there a silent secret slayer on our track, determined to lay us out, one by one?"

The band gazed at each other in alarm, and then came a furious uproar outside, when in rushed the sentinel, dragging behind him the idiot boy.

In a moment knives and pistols gleamed on the air, and death seemed near.

CHAPTER VIII.

KNAVE OR FOOL.

"HALLO, what is the meaning of this?" cried the Wild-cat chief.

"This fellow gave the signal all right," explained the sentinel; "he knocked on the wall with a rock, then, when I gave the me-ow he answered it. I tipped the rock, thinking that it was Number 13, but, when he crawled in I detected that it was a stranger, and so I grabbed him and brought him in here."

The keen eyes of the Wild-cat leader had been fixed intently on the boy, who did not seem in the least alarmed by his perilous position, although he wriggled a little in the grasp of his captor, which was evidently no gentle one.

The other members of the band, in the mean time, had recognized the boy, and with exclamations of, "Oh, it's only that blarsted idiot!" and similar remarks, had put up their weapons.

"Let him be, for a moment, until I talk to him," ordered the leader; the sentinel released the boy, a proceeding manifestly to his comfort, for he immediately straightened up and shook himself like a water-dog.

"Oh, what a lot of Cats!" he exclaimed; "and what big ones, too, and no tails!" Either the boy was too dull of comprehension to understand the peril of his situation, or else he thought the easiest way to get out of it would be to play the fool.

"Harkye, young man, speak the truth now it will be the worse for you!" the leader said sternly.

"Speak the truth and shame the devil!" ejaculated the youth, mechanically, evidently re-

peating a sentence which with much care and pains, had been drilled into his dull mind.

"Yes, that is it exactly. Now then, who set you to play the spy on me?" The captain put this curt question because he suspected the idiot boy to have been the tracker who, he fancied, had trailed him from the town.

"Me play spy—I spy!" and the boy laughed in idiotic glee, evidently confounding the question with childhood's games.

"No, no; who told you to follow me?"

"Nobody."

"Do you see that rope there?" and the Wild-cat chief pointed to the knotted rope hanging from the roof of the vaulted chamber.

"See? Yes; see it, sure."

"We hang people on that who don't answer the questions we put to them. Would you like to be hung?"

"Yes," answered the boy, promptly, evidently thinking there would be sport in the operation.

"Well, you will have the chance if I don't get some satisfaction out of you, you young cub!" exclaimed the outlaw, grimly. "Rig a hangman's noose in that rope some of you, and fix a platform for the boy to stand on."

With speedy alacrity the gang complied; not a man of them but could tie that peculiar knot known as the hangman's noose. The platform was arranged under the rope, and all the while the idiot boy surveyed the proceedings with a pleased smile, as if he was overjoyed to see the Cats take so much trouble on his account.

If the boy really knew the danger which threatened him—if he was at all conscious of the great peril in which he stood—for these wild and lawless men regarded his taking off with as much unconcern as the death of a rabbit—then he possessed wonderful nerve to bear himself so bravely.

"Now get up there, and put your head in that pretty little plaything," the outlaw commanded.

The boy obeyed, the expression upon his face indicating that he was very much pleased with the entire proceedings.

"Now then, answer my questions and answer truthfully, or I'll have the boxes knocked away, and then up you will go."

"Up that?" and the idiot pointed to where the last faint light of dying day shone in far above his head. "Oh, won't that be jolly!"

"Now, who told you to follow me?"

"Nobody."

"You know me, don't you?"

"No."

"You know what I am?"

"A Cat!" and the boy chuckled as if it was a good joke.

"You have seen me in Juanapolis?"

"No."

"Yes you have; you know me; confess at once or you will swing!"

"No cat there as big as you."

If this was not real, then it was the perfection of dissembling.

The outlaw lost his patience.

"You infernal hound!" he cried, "don't try to play with me with any of your cursed nonsense. You know well enough who I am,"

The boy shook his head, vacantly.

"What brought you up here—what were you doing in the canyon, anyway?"

"He-haw! he-haw! he-haw!" bellowed the idiot, at the top of his lungs, and so comical was his imitation of a mule's bray that all the band were convulsed with laughter, the leader excepted. He, wiser than his fellows, believed that the idiot's visit boded great danger to them.

"What do you mean by that infernal noise?"

"Mule."

"Yes, I know that it is a mule, but, what of it?"

"Lost."

"Whose mule?"

"Mr. Shannon's."

"Oh, and you came to the mountains in search of it?"

"He-haw, he-haw, he-haw!" and again the idiot imitated a mule so capitally that the outlaws again roared with laughter.

But the Wild-cat leader still feared a ruse.

"And did the mule come into the canyon?"

"I don't know, do you?"

"Then why did you come into the canyon?"

"To see if the mule was here."

"But, why did you knock on the rock with a stone?"

"It was a stick; I had a stick in my hand, and I always thump the rocks when I walk along."

Now, this was a common custom enough of this boy, and they all knew it.

"But, why did you me-ow like a cat?"

"I heard another cat and I thought it funny. The other cat in the rock said me-ow! and I, in the canyon, said me-ow, me-ow," and here the idiot imitated the cry of a cat so faithfully that any one would have sworn the sound came from a real cat.

"And you crept into the rock after the cat?"

"Yes, it was so funny," and the boy laughed in his vacant way.

The story was probable enough; in fact, it did really seem the height of improbability, if the boy was spying upon the Wild-cat band, that he should have ventured boldly into their den, and, by so doing, completely place himself in their power.

But the leader of the outlaws was not yet satisfied; he had reason to hate the boy, and with that hate a little fear was mingled. The idiot was so different from the rest of mankind; he did such strange things, and acted so queerly, that, half the time, the miners believed if he really didn't possess sense, he had in its place a sort of instinct which answered almost as well.

The outlaw leader was perplexed; for the moment he hardly knew how to act; if the boy really was innocent of any intention of prying into the secrets of the Wild-cat band, yet he had managed to stumble upon their mountain resort.

"What do you say, boys, is it safe to let this fellow go with the secret of our cave in his possession?" he asked. "What assurance have we that he will not reveal it to the first man he comes across, and if he does that, our cake will be all dough, of course."

The outlaws shook their heads, gravely; decidedly, in their opinion, it was not safe to let the idiot go free.

The Wild-cat leader saw that the band agreed with him.

"It is hang, then, boys?"

"Oh, yes," they replied.

"Yes, hang!" cried the boy, gleefully. "Knock away these things and see me go up like a monkey!"

It was plain that the poor idiot had little idea of what would happen to him when the boxes were knocked away.

"Kick 'em away, boys, and let her sliver!" was the outlaw's unfeeling order, and away went the boxes.

But, at the same time, the idiot, who evidently had his own ideas about this hanging matter, curled upward like a monkey on the rope, and the first thing the outlaws knew he was going up hand over hand, regular sailor fashion.

The outlaws swore, for it was plain that he could escape through the hole in the roof, as he had plainly intended to do from the first, that being his idea of what the rope was for.

The "Cats" drew their pistols and blazed away, but, at the first discharge, the concussion put the candles out, plunging the cave-chamber into utter darkness, and thus securing the escape of the idiot, beyond a doubt.

The boy was off, and with him carried the secret of the outlaws' stronghold.

CHAPTER IX.

WHO THEY WERE.

THE discovery of the murdered man right in the main street of the town of course excited a great deal of talk.

During the morning a little group had gathered in front of the hotel, and from discussion of the mysterious murder they fell to talking about the two pilgrims who had found their way into the camp on the previous night.

The town, somehow, thought it was the proper thing to do to kinder adopt these two young persons, or at least see that they were well provided for; the town we say had got this idea into its head without taking the trouble to discuss the matter. It was one of those rare cases where everybody thought alike on the same subject and at the same time.

"I suppose that somebody ought to go up and see them and see how they get along, old Shannon suggested.

"Yes," responded the doctor, who stood leaning against the doorway, "that would be the proper thing, it strikes me."

"Oh, yes; you want to kinder get them to show their hand, so that we will know what to do for them, for I suppose the boys will have to ante up a leetle to help them along at first," Desmond remarked; he had sauntered up and joined the group just then.

"The proper thing, gents, is a committee—a committee fur to wait onto 'em and tender 'em the freedom of the town an' all that sort o' thing," the giant from Taos remarked. "Whar I was hatched down onto the Mexican line we used to do them sort o' things right up to the handle. I reckon that I have bin on more committees than a four-armed man could shake a stick at in a week. If you want any p'int, gents, jis' pump me and I'll g'in 'em to you, slick as a whistle."

"A committee to find out their wants would be the proper thing, I should think," young Shannon assented; "and, Doctor, you would be a good man to head it."

"Oh, no; I must beg to be excused," the host of the hotel replied at once. "I don't take any stock in women, at all, gentlemen, particularly young and pretty girls like this one, so I will be much obliged to you if you will count me out. But if it comes to raising a subscription, or providing funds, or anything of that sort, why, I will do my level best with any man in the camp."

Desmond was the next to speak.

"Well, gents, I don't hanker after any responsibility, and ain't apt to go into any place where I think that my room will be considered better than my company, but, as I think that it is the duty of every citizen to move in this here, I am willing to take a place on the committee if so be as how my company will be desirable and I ain't interfering with any other gent's game."

"That's bully, and so will I!" cried the Taos man.

"We don't want a gang," Desmond remarked, rather crossly; "we don't want to frighten the gal with the idea that a fire company is going to call on her. A committee of three strikes me as being about the proper thing. I say, Shannon, let either you or your father make the third."

"You go, Roland," said the old man; "you talked with her, last night, and I s'pose she will have more confidence in you than in any one else."

"All right; I'm agreeable if the rest are."

And so the committee was formed and they proceeded at once to call upon the pilgrims.

At the cabin they were received by the girl and invited in.

"We have called, miss, as a sort of committee, representing the town," Shannon explained, "to see if there is anything that we can do for you."

"Yes, miss, and we thought, maybe, that you would like to tell our folks who you are and how you came to come to our town," Desmond added.

"And Juanapolis stands by you, miss, to its bottom dollar!" the colonel exclaimed, regardless of the frowns of his associates.

As he remarked afterward, he "Be gol-darned" if he was going to stand by and let the other fellows do all the chin-music and he as mute as a dashed clam.

The girl's story was a very simple one and soon told; but there were some strange reservations about it that rather mystified the listeners.

She had come from the North. There were reasons why she could not stay where she had lived. She had heard of the rich strikes made in the San Juan district, and that prosperous camps were growing up there, and thought that there might be a chance for her brother and herself to gain a living there; so they had journeyed to the southward. On the trail they had met the idiot boy, and he had conducted them to Juanapolis. Her name, Constantia Brown, her brother's, Michael Brown. This was all there was to her story.

When asked what she thought of doing, she answered that she hadn't any idea, but she would gladly do anything that she could make an honest living by.

The committee pondered over the matter, and being unable to come to a conclusion, decided to call a public meeting that evening when the men would be all in the town, and submit the matter to them.

Runners were sent out to notify all the miners in the neighborhood, for the committee were on their mettle, and were determined that the matter should be brought before "a full board."

No doubt the gathering would be a rousing one.

CHAPTER X.

DESMOND'S LITTLE GAME.

THAT Desmond should volunteer to be a member of the committee, was something of a surprise to the miners when the fact became public, for that gentleman always had been noted, since his arrival in the camp, for paying strict attention to his own business.

The gambler was a man much given to reflection, a silent fellow, generally, and sparing of words, and from this, with his associates at large, he passed for being extremely shrewd and long-headed.

The man, despite his professed aversion to women, had been impressed by the rare beauty of the girl, but, besides this admiration, the gambler had another idea in his head, and which was fully as powerful as the first in inducing him to take an interest in the lady.

The meeting of the citizens had been fixed to commence at nine o'clock, rather a late hour, but the idea was to allow time for even the most distantly located miner to get in.

About half-past seven the miners began to come in.

The three members of the committee, Desmond, Shannon, and the big fellow from Taos, were lounging in front of the hotel, where a rude platform, built of boxes, had been placed.

"What do you think, is it in the game for the pilgrims to be present?" Desmond asked, abruptly.

Shannon said he thought it would be a good idea for the two to be present, so that everybody could have a look at them and see what sort of "babes" they were that the town was proposing to adopt.

And the colonel, with a great many unnecessary words, also approved of the idea.

"S'pose I go up and fetch 'em down; that is, unless you hanker after the job, Shannon?" Desmond observed.

Now, the young man did not particularly "hanker" after it, and he had an idea that the other did, so he at once said that he'd rather be excused, adding that he thought it would be better for him to stay where he was and talk the matter up with the miners as they came into town, being, from his position of store-keeper, about as well acquainted with them as any man in the camp.

Now the gentleman from Taos, seeing that he was being ignored in this arrangement, his dignity was affronted.

"See hyer, gents!" he exclaimed, "I'm the

antelope w'ot ought to go. I've got a kinder mild and soothin' way about me that takes first-rate."

"You can go along with me, if you like," Cool Desmond replied; he saw that the giant was disposed to make trouble, and had already made up his mind how to deal with him.

Grumbly the other agreed, adding, however, that he supposed he would have to handle the "heft" of the talk.

The cabin occupied by the two strangers was right on the outskirts of the town, and the two soon reached the spot.

"You wait outside while I go in," ordered the gambler, as cool as a cucumber, to his companion, as the two paused at the door.

"W'ot?" cried the giant, in disgusted amazement.

"You wait outside the door while I go in, I say."

Grumbly he said that he would remain outside, although he protested that it was rough on him, and he would be "durned" if he would "a' stood" it from any other man.

The gambler knocked at the door, the sweet voice of the girl bade him enter, and he walked in.

The maid was sitting by the window in the side of the cabin which commanded a view of the distant hills that, like grim sentinels, hemmed in Death Valley and the camp of Juanapolis.

The boy was in one of the bunks, all wrapped up in a blanket, and he started as Desmond entered and gazed anxiously at him as though he feared that he came with some evil intent.

Briefly, as was his wont, Cool Desmond explained that he had come for the purpose of escorting the two to the meeting which had been gotten up in their behalf. But the boy instantly manifested a strong repugnance to the idea.

"Oh, I cannot go!" he exclaimed; "I cannot bear to face a crowd of strangers; I will not go!"

Desmond was amazed at the strange excitement, and could not understand why it should arise.

The girl evidently was alarmed at the boy's manner, and went at once to the side of the bunk.

"Do not be afraid," she said; "you need not go unless you wish."

"But you—you will go and leave me all alone here," he exclaimed, evidently in a state of feverish fear.

"You will have to go, miss, because the boys won't be satisfied at all if they don't see you, but as for the young man, I suppose that he can stay at home if he wants to," Desmond observed.

"I shall only be absent a little while, and you can bar the door; there isn't any danger; no one will disturb you."

"Oh, no, not the least bit of danger," the gambler added, "and you need not be afraid, young man, about your sister; I will see that she is well taken care of and comes safe home again. You see, miss, I'm a very plain man, and I never sling many words, but what I say, I mean. Of course, your business is your own,

but, maybe, it might pay you to take some such man as myself into your confidence. Maybe you've come down here on a secret trail—maybe you are on the scent of a good thing, and there is enough in it, so that you can afford to let a third party in for a share."

The girl looked amazed at this, and the boy, half raising himself in the bunk, glared at the visitor with anxious eyes.

"You see, I kinder got an idea in my head," he continued, "that maybe you are on a trail that leads right back to the massacre of Conejos."

With a loud scream the boy fell back in a dead faint, while the girl sprung to her feet, white with horror.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MEETING.

DESMOND, although so cool, was surprised at the consternation excited by his words. He had expected to produce a certain result—had expected to see surprise and apprehension appear upon the faces of the two, but was not prepared for this exhibition of fright.

"Hallo! what on earth is the matter?" he demanded.

As soon as she could recover herself the girl had seized a basin of water and immediately commenced bathing the boy's temples.

"What's broke—what's the matter, anyhow?" the gambler continued. "Do you know anything about this massacre of Conejos?"

By this time the girl had recovered her self-possession and was on her guard, or at least, so Desmond thought, and she turned an inquiring face upon him as she said:

"Why, sir, what should we know of it? We are strangers here."

Desmond understood the evasion at once.

"Oh, you might be strangers here and yet know all about it," he observed. "But, if you don't know anything about it, how is it that the mere mention of the thing upsets you so?"

A shrewd question, shrewdly put, but the girl was ready.

"My brother is very weak and nervous, and apt to be hysterical, and the very thought of blood or murder or anything of that kind affects him terribly; it almost drives him crazy as you have just seen, and of course when I see him thus afflicted naturally I am terrified, for I have been told that a sudden fright might cause his death."

The explanation, though a reasonable one, did not satisfy Desmond; he knew better—knew that the girl was deceiving him.

"But you know all about this massacre, don't you?"

"No, sir, I do not; I do not know anything about it."

The prompt denial considerably astonished the questioner, the more so as the manner of the girl seemed to indicate that she was speaking the truth; but, although baffled for the present, the gambler felt sure that he had struck the right scent.

"I see that you ain't inclined to speak," he remarked; "but I tell you what it is, you won't find a man in this town who would be of more use to you than I."

The girl did not reply to this, being busy at the moment with the boy who, under her ministering care, had slowly revived.

"Oh, Constantia, shall we *never* hear the last of these deeds of blood?" he moaned.

If Desmond had not been well informed to the contrary he would surely have thought that this stripling boy had had some active part in the massacre of Conejos, the most terrible deed of blood that has ever stained the annals of Colorado.

"Cheer up; you must not yield to these weak fears; there isn't any danger; no one will trouble you."

"No, my lad, not while I am around," Desmond hastened to say.

Conducted then by Cool Desmond she left the house, and on the outside encountered the huge, bearded man from Taos who had been amusing himself by swearing at Desmond in two languages, there not being oaths enough in one to satisfy him.

Quite a crowd had collected in front of the hotel when the trio arrived there, and by the time fixed for the meeting to commence there was hardly a man for twenty miles around who was not on the spot.

Old Shannon had been selected to preside over the deliberations, and as the old storekeeper was quite a fluent, off-hand speaker no better choice could have been made.

In a few well chosen words he explained the situation; two orphans, like the babes in the wood, had wandered down into Death Valley, and it behooved the citizens of Juanapolis to look after them until they were able to look after themselves.

A few of the men of the town had talked the matter over a bit, and they had come to the conclusion that the best thing to be done was to get up a subscription so as to give the two a good fair start.

The managers of the affair had arranged everything very well indeed. Those who wished to subscribe money or dust, and had it with them, could plank it down at once, while those who hadn't the "plunder" handy were invited to put down their names on a subscription paper, and opposite to the name the amount of money, or lacking funds, the article or articles which they were willing to give.

As old Shannon said, every man in the town ought to be represented, and if in some cases funds were low, why there wasn't anybody but what had some article, no matter how trifling, which could be spared, and these articles, after they were all collected, could be put up at auction and sold to the highest bidder.

The meeting broke up in a blaze of glory, and as more than one of the citizens declared, the camp of Juanapolis had done herself proud that evening.

Upon the next evening the auction was to take place, thus allowing time for the miners to go to their cabins and hunt up their spare treasures.

One by one the men marched up to the temporary stand and deposited the plunder, and a more peculiar lot of miscellaneous articles probably was never collected.

The donation party, as the miners popularly

termed it, was a most decided success. Two hundred dollars in cash were raised, besides provisions enough to last the two for a month at least, and then came the most difficult question of all. What could the orphans find to do? What light, easy business could they go into with a cash capital of two hundred dollars with a reasonable prospect of success?

Finally the committee decided that a restaurant would be about as good as anything; this was a sly lick at the Doctor, who had not been as active in this business as public opinion thought he ought to be.

So it was decided that the two should open a first-class eating saloon, and after much deliberation it was decided that "The Pilgrim's Ranch" would be a good name for it.

CHAPTER XII.

THE HALF-BREED GIRL.

THE camp, as we have said, was situated upon a "crick," and naturally the habitations of the miners clustered near to the stream, for the convenience of wood and water.

About two miles from the town, up the "crick," lived a man who was noted as a strange character. He was called Jacob Lauderdale, and was from Florida—a tall, gaunt, weather-beaten old man, with a skin-like parchment. He was ugly and cross-grained, with a marvelous appetite for liquor and an equally strong desire not to pay for it, if he could help it. In brief, he was a confirmed old miser, and, as the general sentiment expressed it, if he wasn't rich he ought to be, for he didn't spend anything that he could help.

Not a man in the region had a good word for old Jake; and as more than one miner bluntly expressed it, he "wasn't no good to nobody, no-how."

And old Lauderdale had a daughter, as peculiar and as cross-grained as himself. This was the other female to whom we have alluded. Iris she was called—a tall, muscularly-built girl, of exceeding strength. She was not bad-looking, although very dark-complexioned; she had a masculine face, high cheek-bones, glittering black eyes, which would have been pretty had it not been for the hard, stern expression they commonly wore. Few people ever saw the eyes of Iris Lauderdale shine with a soft and womanly light.

It was quite apparent that there was a good deal of Indian blood in the composition of the girl.

Lauderdale had not been a great while in the valley, and at first he had been extremely unlucky in his undertakings; for a wonder, Shannon, the storekeeper, was very liberal with him and gave credit, something rare in the mining regions where goods are almost invariably cash. Then a chance came for the storekeeper to buy a valuable claim "up the crick" for quite a reasonable sum, and after the claim was purchased, he arranged with old Lauderdale to work it on shares.

Of course there was a reason for this liberality—a cat in the meal-tub, as the saying is, and the miners, who were no fools, speedily made up their minds in regard to the reason

why the Shannons, father and son, were so liberal and easy with close-fisted old Jake.

Young Shannon had a sneaking regard for the handsome half-breed girl, and he was trying to curry favor with the rather ugly-tempered and extremely haughty maid by extending kindness to her father.

When Lauderdale had first arrived he staked out a claim on the creek, a short distance below the town, and when the news spread that a real, live woman had arrived in the valley, there was a good deal of excitement, for nothing produces more commotion in a new camp than the arrival of the first woman.

The boys made it convenient to call on their way and tender assistance to the new-comers, but the girl was as cold as a statue, and never took the slightest notice of these little attentions.

It took just a week for Juanapolis to learn what sort of a woman old Jake's daughter was, and when the discovery was made, the men of the town unanimously came to the conclusion that she could paddle her own canoe if any one in the camp could.

And from that time forth she had very little trouble.

The day was drawing near its close, and old Jake, having done all the work he cared to do that day, was anxiously inquiring about his supper.

"You are in a hurry to-night, father," the girl remarked, busily engaged in frying salt pork, ever the miner's stand-by.

"Yes, I'm going to town; it's settling-day with the Shannons, you know."

"You have done pretty well this month, hav'n't you?"

"Furst-rate—furst-rate, but you needn't say so to any one, you know," he enjoined.

"Who should I say it to? Who do I find to talk to, I would like to know?" the girl asked, disdainfully.

"You will see young Shannon to-night, you know," the old man explained, "and I want you to put on a poor mouth, and say that the claim ain't done very well this month, and that we hope to do better next month, and then give him his share; I've got it all done up in a bag for him."

"And so you intend to cheat him out of about half that is really coming to him, I suppose?" the girl exclaimed, scornfully.

"Oh, not so much as that, but what difference does it make? He won't care or won't say anything, even if he had a suspicion that I was gouging him, so long as you carry the dust. He thinks a heap of you, I tell you."

"And much good it will do him!"

"It will do us some good, though," the old man answered, shrewdly. "And it is my little game to take advantage of all such little things."

"I sha'n't do it!" proclaimed the girl, abruptly. "What good is it for me to lead the man on? I don't care anything for him, and I don't want him to think that I do. I don't want to ask any favors of him."

"Yes, but I do," observed the old man, with a cunning grin.

"Well, do it, then, and don't bring me into the affair at all."

"You are getting infernally stiff-necked and obstinate all of a sudden," the old man growled. "But I know what is the matter with you; you have got your eyes on Desmond, and now you don't want to look on another man."

A little flush came up into the girl's dark cheeks, but she went on with her work without making any reply.

"It isn't any use for you to think about him, for he is one of the kind of men who are always on the make, and if he did get into a love affair with you, and then had a chance to make a strike by going after another woman, he would throw you overboard in a minute."

There was a very peculiar and ugly glitter in the eyes of the girl as she listened to this speech.

"He had better not," she rejoined. "If he does come after me, he had better keep faith, or it will be the worse for him."

"Oh, go your own gait, but if you will take my advice, young Shannon is the man!" the old man exclaimed, petulantly. "But, come, will you do as I ask you?"

"Yes," replied the girl, slowly; "but if mischief comes of it, blame yourself, and not me."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE IDIOT AT HOME.

HIGH up on the side of the great hill that overlooked the mining-camp on the north was quite an extensive little cave, the entrance to which was quite small, but inside it widened out into a good-sized apartment.

In this cave the Idiot Boy had taken up his quarters.

Witless Will—so the boy was named—was about as well known as any soul in the valley. He was one of the original settlers, and in fact had come into the region before Juanapolis had a local habitation and a name. He was the only survivor of the bloody massacre of Conejos, the story of which we must soon tell, for it is most intimately connected with the tale which we are relating, although the massacre happened quite a while before the time of which we now write.

The idiot was stretched out in front of the cave, sunning himself after the fashion common to him, and as he lay flat on his back, basking in the sunlight, his attention was attracted to a man toiling up the hillside.

That the objective point of the man's journey was the cave of the idiot hardly admitted of a doubt, from the direction which he was pursuing.

Will knew the man well enough. He was called Dick Devine and was one of the idle ne'er-do-wells of the camp. Little work had he ever been known to do since he had arrived in the valley, and his principal occupations consisted of drinking whisky and playing cards.

In person he was a slouchy, long-legged fellow, with an evil, hang-dog face—one of those men who never looked any one straight in the eye.

Devine climbed up the steep hillside until he reached the ledge where the cave was situated; then he came over to where the idiot was stretched out in the sun,

"Hallo, Will!" he exclaimed, seating himself upon a rock and wiping the perspiration from his brow; "mighty hot, ain't it?"

"It is good; the sun makes me well," the boy replied.

"Blamed if it does me, and that is what the matter is with you; you lay stretched out hyer like a durned rattlesnake until the sun bakes all the brains out of your head."

The boy merely grunted at this, but did not make any reply.

"Say, Will, wouldn't you like a chance to make a big stake?" the man continued. "I reckon that I know whar a smart, likely chap about your size kin make a heap of money."

"Money? Good!" remarked the idiot, tersely.

"You bet it is good, and you are jest the boy to make it, too, though folks do say that you don't know nothing and hain't got any sense, nohow."

"Mebbe not; who knows?"

"Well, I'm a-betting on you, my boy!" the other protested, confidently. "I know that you ain't half so big a fool as you look or as people think you are."

The idiot nodded with an extremely grave face, as much as to say that he perfectly agreed with the speaker.

"Now, I'm on a big strike, and I am willing to let you in for a share if you will agree to help me," and at this point the man assumed a mysterious tone.

Again the boy nodded as if he understood all about it.

"You have heered tell of these road-agents who have made things lively on the trails north of the camp hyer?"

"Oh, yes, bang, bang! shoot, kill sometimes."

"Exactly, them is the critters. Well, now, my idee is that them fellers have got a hiding-place somewhar near this very identical camp."

"Who knows? maybe!" and the idiot looked extremely wise.

"Now, if we could find out wharabouts these fellers have got their hole, we could make a pile of money out of it, for thar's a big reward offered by two or three parties. Don't you suppose that you could find out about them?"

"Oh, yes; I will go with you," responded the boy immediately.

"And you will show me where these fellows have their hole?" exclaimed Devine, a look of satisfaction appearing upon his evil face.

"I will look—maybe find!" answered the boy, in a very confident manner.

The expression upon the face of the other changed, and was succeeded by a look of annoyance.

"Yes, but don't you know?"

"How know?"

"Whar the Wild-cats live, you know; that is the way these road-agents disguise themselves."

"Cats—Wild-cats?" and the boy began to ponder as if in deep thought.

"Yes, they live in a cave, like this one hyer, whar you hang out; that is, I reckon they do; a cave in the mountains; in some canyon maybe—some place like the Devil's Canyon, you know."

The idiot shook his head; he did not know.

The poor disordered brain refused to work and memory was at fault.

The seeker after knowledge was satisfied, though, that the idiot did know, if he could only remember, and so he made another effort.

"You have seen these big cats, ain't you, big as men, you know?"

"Big cats? No! don't like cats—me-ow—scratch!" and the boy shook his head in decided disapprobation.

"But don't you know any cave in the mountains besides this one here where you live?" asked the man, making another endeavor to aid the flagging memory of the boy, who again shook his head.

"No good; all dreams," he replied, tapping his head significantly.

"Yes, but don't you remember any of the dreams?" the other persisted, eagerly.

The idiot answered with a blank stare, showing that it was not possible to get any information out of him. All recollection of his adventure with the road-agents in their mountain cave and his miraculous escape from the terrible death to which they had doomed him had faded completely away.

"Well, pard, I am sorry we can't go into the thing together, for I think we could make a big strike if we could only get on the right trail, but, perhaps you may run across them one of these days, seeing that you are allers wandering around the mountains, and if you do, why, just let me know and we'll go in for it. So-long!" and then Mr. Devine took himself off, extremely disgusted at his non-success.

"He is either an idiot for sure and don't know nothing, or else he is playing it on me, and blessed if I can tell which it is," he muttered, as he descended the hill.

As for the boy, he stretched himself out at full length again but kept close watch upon the man as he descended to the town, the pupils of his eyes contracting and expanding every now and then just for all the world like a cat's orbs, and from the peculiar expression upon the face, one used to the boy would have been sure that he was meditating mischief.

Nothing in particular worth noting occurred that night in camp.

By one o'clock the town was as quiet as a graveyard. The last place to close was Desmond's saloon and the last man to leave it was Devine. He stopped at the door and exchanged a few words with the host, and then with unsteady steps, proceeded on his homeward road.

As a matter of precaution he carried his revolver ready cocked in his hands, for he had been playing pretty nearly all the evening and had risen from the table quite a winner.

The precautions taken by the man were not needless, for he was waited for; a rough and burly miner who had lost his last dollar at the gaming-table, to Devine, had made up his mind to square the matter by playing highwayman, and having selected a good ambush, was lying in wait for his man.

On came Devine, and just as the concealed miner, having noticed the revolver carried so openly by the other, was debating whether to jump out at the successful gamester at the risk

of getting the worst of the affair, or to lie still and let him pass, there sounded on the air the short, quick bark of a revolver-shot.

Devine threw up his hands, staggered, and then, with a shrill scream of mortal agony, went down.

The shot and the scream at once gave the alarm, and the miners came pouring out into the street, more or less dressed, in eager haste, anxious to learn what had happened.

Devine was dead before any one reached his side, the shot proving fatal almost instantly.

The miner who had laid in ambush pretended that he was coming up the street and so had witnessed the affair. He had heard the report of the pistol, then saw the man fall but couldn't for the life of him tell where the shot had come from.

But, when the body was examined, the mystery was out. The secret slayer again had been at his bloody sport. Devine had been shot in exactly the same place where Kirby had received his mortal wound.

What was the meaning of this fearful work?

CHAPTER XIV.

THE STORY OF THE IDIOT.

THE restaurant, which the generosity of the miners had enabled the pilgrims to open, was a success from the beginning.

In fact, the new enterprise had nothing but good wishes from all, with the exception of the Doctor; the "Pilgrim's Ranch" cut in a little on the business of his hotel; and then, he hated women anyway.

The beautiful face of the girl had taken the town for all it was worth. The new restaurant was taking the wind out of the Doctor's sails, and he was envious, that was all.

The miners had perfect faith in the maiden; if there were reasons which seemed good to her why she shouldn't tell any more of her story than she had revealed, why, she knew best, and it wasn't anybody else's business.

One of the champions of the two was the young storekeeper, Shannon. He took a lively interest in the new enterprise, and did his best to make it a success.

He was accustomed to run in every now and then in order to see how they were getting along.

And on one of these visits, while he was conversing with the girl—the boy kept always in the background and rarely came forward to see anybody, a circumstance which, as he was presumed to be quite sick, astonished no one—who should make his appearance but the idiot boy?

He came marching in with the meaningless grin upon his face and nodded familiarly to the two.

"Hungry! want something to eat!" he exclaimed, patting his stomach as he spoke in a very significant manner.

"Give him what he wants and I will pay for it," Shannon said. "Will is a sort of privileged character, and on account of his infirmity claims hospitality from every one."

"Pie!" said the idiot, pointing to a large and tempting-looking pie which was displayed on a table near by, and which had attracted his eyes.

"Would you like some?" the girl asked.

"All," answered the boy; modesty was not one of his failings.

"Not all of it!" Shannon exclaimed.

But the idiot protested that all was what he wanted, and that less than all would not be enough, so he was presented with the pie, and marched away with it in triumph.

"Poor boy! What a pity it is that his wits are affected," the girl remarked, her heart touched by the unfortunate condition of the lad.

"Yes, his story is a sad one; have you ever heard it?"

The maid replied in the negative, and she begged that the young storekeeper would satisfy her by relating the story.

"I will do so with pleasure," Shannon answered. "Possibly since you have come into our town you have heard mention made of the massacre of Conejos."

The girl nodded; she had acquired much more command over herself than she had at first, and beyond growing slightly paler did not manifest any particular feeling. But the boy Michael, who had, apparently, been fast asleep in his bunk, where, as usual, he was wrapped up tightly in his blanket, was aroused, for now his pale and anxious face appeared, and with straining eyes he gazed upon the young man while he rehearsed the story of the idiot.

"This valley has only recently been settled," he began; "the town has not yet seen a year's growth, although the mines in this locality are exceeding rich, but it is so far away from the beaten track that it was only by accident the discovery was made that there were rich ores along the course of the little stream which runs through the valley."

"The first settler, and, in fact, the original discoverer of the valley, was a Spanish-American named Andrea Conejos. With a few associates he discovered that there were rich lodes in this vicinity and pitched his camp here. He commenced to mine at the upper end of the valley where the stream comes down out of the mountains. Of course the news that the Conejos party had made a rich strike here soon got abroad, and emigrants commenced to pour in and settled this town upon the site where it now stands. As is usual with all new mining-camps the first-comers were a pretty rough set, and, somehow, they got to dislike Conejos. At first this feeling vented itself in talk, but finally, desperate men, not satisfied with talk, betook themselves to deeds. Conejos's little camp was attacked one night and every soul that dwelt therein was brutally murdered, with one exception—this idiot boy, Conejos's son. He had received a fearful wound upon the head and had been left for dead, but, by a miracle almost, he recovered, though the terrible shock as well as the dreadful wound which he had received had bereft him of sense, and from that day to this he has been an idiot."

"Conejos was commonly supposed to have quite a large sum in gold-dust on the place, and it was to get possession of this treasure that the murder was committed, but if the boy is to be believed the robbers did not succeed in finding

the hiding-place where Conejos had secreted it, and although the mine there is supposed to be a good one, yet since the murder it has never been worked for any length of time. Three or four parties have tried it but without success; and then, too, there is an impression abroad that the spirits of the murdered men, who were so foully slain, haunt the spot where they met their death, and few men are brave enough to care about encountering the angry and vengeful ghosts."

"And the poor boy saw the dreadful sight?"

"Yes; for, although taken completely by surprise, Conejos's party made a determined fight, and the boy was the last to fall. Of course his description of the affair is a loose and disjointed one, but, as far as can be told from his description, there were some ten or fifteen assailants, and they were all disguised. It is a fortunate circumstance, perhaps, for the boy, that he did not recognize any of the attacking party, for there isn't much doubt in my mind that some of the reckless villains are living right in the camp here, and if they had any idea that the boy would be able to recognize and denounce them, they would not have hesitated to put him out of the way long ago."

"His affliction then has really tended to preserve his life."

"Yes; I do not think there is any doubt in regard to that. His memory seems to be a total blank in regard to the sad events of that terrible night, except that when he is questioned about it, he raves of black men who had gleaming knives, and then he says red blood flows like water."

After a little more conversation Shannon departed.

"Sister!" cried the youth, suddenly, from the bunk the instant that the door closed behind the young man, "the money of Conejos is still concealed where he hid it. Who has a better right to it than we?"

"This boy," the other answered, unhesitatingly.

"He shall help us to find it, and then we can take care of him and go far from here."

The girl shook her head sadly; she doubted.

CHAPTER XV.

THE CATS IN COUNCIL.

THE outlaws, clad in their strange disguises, were seated in their cave busy in conversation.

The leader of the band had just come in, and the topic which the outlaws were discussing was the mysterious death of Dick Devine, for the murdered man was a member of the Cat band.

"What does it mean? Can any of you guess?" asked the leader, in sullen tones. "This is the second one of our boys stricken down right in the open street by this mysterious marksman without being given any chance for his life. Who is doing this?"

The members of the band all shook their heads; they were not able to afford any information upon this point.

"Let us put that infernal idiot out of the way!" exclaimed one of the outlaws, abruptly. "I don't believe that we will have a bit of luck while that fellow is alive."

"That's so! He knows the secret of our cave here, and he might bring the miners down upon us at any minute," a rough-looking villain declared.

"Well, as for that, I do not think there is much danger," the chief replied. "The fellow is an idiot, without any doubt, and his memory ain't worth a cent."

"These idiots are mighty cunning sometimes," asserted the other.

Just at this point the report of a pistol sounded in the outer cave. In hot haste the "Cats" jumped to their feet and drew their weapons; the sound was a warning of danger; but, after the pistol-shot, the stillness of death reigned within the cave.

The outlaws looked at each other, a troubled expression in their eyes. Had the avenger—the secret slayer, sought them right in their council hall?

They hesitated but for a moment; then their leader took it upon himself to command action.

"That means mischief, boys, of some sort, and we must see what it is!" he remarked, and with drawn weapons, ready for the fray, they rushed into the little outer cave. The suspicion was correct; there had indeed been mischief done.

In the center of the apartment lay the sentinel whose duty it was to guard the door. Plainly he had admitted one too many within the cave and the last comer had slain him.

The secret slayer had sought the outlaws right in their mountain retreat! It was now conceded that the first two members of the band had not been killed by accident; one hand had done the deed, and the same hand had laid low the sentinel, who kept watch and ward at the door of the cave. The manner of the wound demonstrated this; the sentinel had been shot in exactly the same place as the other two.

When these discoveries were made, up from the throats of the enraged outlaws came a cry for vengeance. They believed that they knew who the secret slayer was; they suspected the only party who had ever penetrated into the secret of the entrance into the cave; they believed that the idiot boy was the doer of these deeds of blood.

The plan to seize Witless Will was easily enough arranged. Four of the "Cats" were detailed to lay in ambush near the cave of the idiot, every evening, until he came, then they were to wait until he was safe in slumber's chain; then enter, gag and bind and transport him to their retreat in the mountains.

"And about this gal, boys—what do you all think of her?" the leader inquired. "She is mighty thick with the idiot, and she is very much agitated whenever anything is said about the massacre of Conejos. Now, some way, I have got an idea into my head that she knows something about that little affair. In fact, I shouldn't be surprised if she knew where the old Greaser concealed his money, for I have an idea that she is related to Conejos; for she is the very image of Conejos's daughter."

Some of the rest nodded; they had noticed this, also.

"When we get the idiot into our power we may be able to get the truth out of him—that

is, if he really knows anything," the outlaw continued.

There wasn't much doubt in the minds of the band that it was the idiot boy who was doing the mischief, and eager and anxious were they to get their hands upon him.

That night, just after the dusky hues of darkness had completely covered in the earth, four well-armed, rough-looking men, from four different points—so it had been arranged, so as not to excite suspicion—stole in toward the hole in the hillside where the poor idiot had his lair.

All of the four had seen the idiot in the town just before nightfall, and they felt pretty certain that he would seek the shelter of his cave somewhere near midnight.

Lying quiet, the four men watched the moon come up, and then, about midnight, saw her retire out of sight behind some heavy cloud-banks. They had watched the lights go out, one by one, in the mining-town, of which, from their position, they commanded an excellent view.

The four were arranged at about an equal distance from the cave, two on the hillside, a little below the line of the ledge upon which the hole was situated, and two to the rear of the cave, and slightly above it.

As they were situated, one of the two men below the cave should be the first to catch the sounds of any one's footsteps ascending the hill, therefore the men above the cave did not trouble themselves to keep as good a watch as the men below.

In fact, one of the fellows—a big, burly, evil-looking ruffian—was so overcome by drowsiness as to doze off to sleep. A code of signals, not calculated to arouse suspicion, had been arranged between the four, so that the first one who heard the coming of the man for whom they waited, could warn the rest.

The man who slept fought all he could to resist the drowsy influence, but for a time he yielded, and slept soundly, and then, all of a sudden he woke—woke with the suspicion that something was near him—something evil was at hand; a cold perspiration came out all over his burly frame, and with haste he reached for his weapons.

CHAPTER XVI. TOO LATE.

THE brawny rascal was not naturally a very quick man, but on this occasion fear led him to move with considerable alacrity, but, quick as he was, the arm of the unseen foe, who was right at his side concealed behind a clump of bushes, was quicker still.

The ruffian was lying on his side, thus affording a fair mark, and, as he reached for his weapon—he had carelessly thrust his revolver down its holster when the drowsiness had crept over him, thinking that he would have plenty of time to draw it before the time for action would come—a steady and sure hand struck a terrible blow, and the single stroke was at once the outlaw's passport to the other world. Just a single moan came from his lips, and then his soul took flight.

So still the night that each one of his comrades distinctly heard the death-groan, and for a moment the sound seemed to awe them into

statues. Bold, strong men, familiar with blood and death, they realized that the grim king of terrors was near; but then, after the one single cry, hearing nothing more, they roused themselves from their stupor and set about to discover the meaning of the sound.

"Hey, Jack?" called one, cautiously.

"All right, Bill," was replied.

"Did you hear that, Bob?" asked the first.

"You bet!"

"Where are you, Mart?" again questioned the first.

But the fourth man, Mart, answered not.

This immediately excited the suspicions of the rest. He might be asleep, but it was not likely.

"Blazes, boys! I'm afeard that something is wrong!" one of the men exclaimed, thus putting into words the thoughts common to all three.

"Let's see, anyhow!" ejaculated one of the others.

The outlaws were prompt to act upon the suggestion, but it was with cautious steps and with drawn, cocked revolvers that they approached the spot where they perceived their comrade stretched at full length upon the ground.

The ruffians had seen death in too many shapes, and too near at hand, to be deceived on the present occasion. The moment they caught sight of the man they understood that he was dead, and, what was worse, that he had died a violent death by a foeman's hand.

The outlaws in stupefied amazement gazed for a few moments at the horrible sight utterly dumfounded. The secret slayer had found them and had done his fearful work, even while they had been on the watch to apprehend him! And, what brought the terrible death of their comrade more clearly home to them, was the thought that it might just as well have been one of them, for they fully realized that the deed had been planned so cleverly and committed so quickly that the assailed man had not had the slightest chance afforded him of escaping from the attack.

Straight to the outlaws' cave in the canyon they journeyed, and, to what few of the rogues who had spent the night there, they told the story of the terrible deed on the hillside.

By ten o'clock the next morning the captain and all the band were on hand, and then the story was rehearsed to a full audience and to the infinite wonder of the listeners. In all their strange life of adventure this was one of the most astounding things they had ever heard. As the tale was told, the members of the band looked at each other with anxious faces: and no wonder, for the matter was getting to be serious in the extreme. There had been thirteen in the band, twelve men and a captain; of the thirteen, four had already fallen.

"Well, boys, I am clean beat," Captain Wildcat averred, after quite a long pause. "I don't know what to make of it. If it goes on in this way much longer there won't be enough of us left to bury the dead. One thing, though, I am pretty sure of, and that is we were barking up the wrong tree the other night when we thought it was the idiot. For a lark some of the boys locked him up in Murphy's shanty last night, just to spite the Irishman, who has a mortal fear

of the idiot, and he wasn't let out till this morning when Murphy came home; so you see there wasn't any chance for *him* to be mixed up in this affair!"

The outlaws gazed at each other with blank countenances. They were all in their ordinary clothes now, with uncovered faces, and had not assumed their odd Cat disguises.

The "Cats" were fearfully dissatisfied; the secret killer had most decidedly demoralized them, and nearly all of them had made up their minds that, if the foe were not soon discovered, they would give leg-bail and get out of the way.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN QUEST OF KNOWLEDGE.

OLD JAKE LAUDERDALE and his girl had come up to the camp. Settling-day had arrived and the old man had come up to square accounts with young Shannon, and in order the better to do this he had brought his daughter along. It was commonly rumored that Shannon was a little sweet on the dark-hued maiden, in spite of her fiery temper, and the knavish old man, who was not ignorant of this, relied upon the girl to make the task of settling accounts an easy one.

As he often chuckled to himself: "It takes a woman to pull the wool over a man's eyes," and most certainly his daughter had been of great assistance to him since he had taken up his abode in Juanapolis, for if it had not been for her, he surely would never have been able to get hold of the mine which he was now working, for there were plenty of better men than he anxious to take hold of the property, and willing to give better terms than those which he had the mine upon.

But the girl had asked Shannon to let her father have it, and the young man had given it to him, much to the astonishment of the town at large, who could not at first understand why such a regular scallawag as old Jake should be preferred to the many better men who were anxious to try their luck; but "kissing goes by favor," it's an old saying and a true one.

And now, so great a rascal was old Lauderdale that, not satisfied with getting the mine on extremely easy terms, he was doing his best to cheat the owner out of his fair share.

Old Jake's mind rather misgave him on this occasion, though, and he had matter for anxious thought as, with his daughter, in the dusk of the evening, he walked up toward the town. The mine had been panning out pretty well, lately, and some of his neighbors who were disposed to be inquisitive had been keeping a pretty sharp lookout in regard to the way things were going. And he was sorely afraid that some one of these neighbors might take it into his head to go to young Shannon and report to him how well the mine was doing. Now, the way the old man had figured it out, he made it appear that the last month was about the poorest one the mine had known since coming into his charge.

He was much troubled in mind; a guilty conscience oppressed him, and just as he got to the outskirts of the camp he resolved to make everything safe by getting the girl to settle up the account and pay over the money.

Young Shannon might question him, particu-

larly if he had been posted by some meddling neighbor, and he might put some question that would not be easy to answer.

"I say, Iris, gal, I guess I will let you do the settling-up with Mr. Shannon," he announced, abruptly, as they approached the store. "Here's the dust, and the account you will find inside the bag. I reckon it is all correct, but I have a mighty poor head for figures sometimes, and, maybe, I may have made a few small mistakes."

The girl understood her father's game just as fully as though he had explained it at length, and her lip curled in contempt.

"Very well; I will do it," she said; "but I am afraid that the mistakes you make are always in your own favor and never in his."

She lent her aid to fool young Shannon because she did not care anything for the man; in fact, she had a supreme contempt—a hatred, for all the miners.

Whether the blood within her veins were Spanish, French, Indian or negro, it was hot and fiery enough.

Hence, it was little wonder, when the rough miners in their uncouth and elephantine way came a-courting, that she received their advances in the worst possible spirit, and replied to civil words with biting, angry speeches. The iron was in her soul; she fancied that all the world, save one, believed that she came of base and ignoble blood.

Even Shannon's civility made her look askance. Perhaps it was this feeling that led her to lend herself a compliant tool to her father's trickery. If the world despised her, she returned the compliment, and so the account was even.

The two entered the store together. As it happened, there were no customers present; so they had a clear field.

The young man was alone in the store, and old Jake greeted him with the hearty warmth that mean men and rascals generally use in this life as a cloak to conceal their true nature.

"My girl has got the dust and the accounts for the month, Mr. Shannon," he said, after the first salutations were over. "It has been a rather poor month, but she will explain about that, while I go out on a little business that I have to attend to."

"The month has not been a very good one, Mr. Shannon," the girl repeated, "and I have not brought you as much money as you have a right to expect."

"Oh, that is all right; I am satisfied," he said, sweeping the bag of dust into the money-drawer without even taking the trouble to weigh it. "If you hadn't brought anything, I should still be just as glad to see you."

Being perfectly satisfied that everything was all right, and that, as usual, Iris had succeeded in getting the amount passed, Jake went down the steps and headed straight for the den of Desmond. This was exactly what the girl wanted, for she wished to talk in private with young Shannon.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A JEALOUS WOMAN.

THE girl had her eyes upon the old man; she understood well enough that he was loitering at

the door for the purpose of seeing how young Shannon would receive the small payment, and she did not fail to see the old fellow take himself off when he found that everything was satisfactory. This afforded her the chance that she wanted, for she had an object in consenting so readily to do the bidding of her father.

A two-fold object in fact had she, and the moment old Jake disappeared she proceeded to accomplish the mission upon which she had come.

She had heard the gossip in regard to Desmond paying attention to the beautiful girl who had so unexpectedly made her appearance in the camp and desired to know if there was any truth in what she had heard. Then she was weary of being used as a catspaw by her father and had made up her mind, if the young storekeeper was favoring her father on her account, then the quicker he knew that he was not gaining favor in her eyes by so doing the better. Half-savage though she was by nature, yet she scorned deception.

"Mr. Shannon, do you know anything about these strangers who have lately come into the valley?" she began, "this brother and sister?"

"Oh, yes," Shannon replied, not at all surprised, since the "pilgrims" had not yet ceased to excite general interest.

"This girl is very beautiful, I believe," and there was a glint of fire in the dark eyes, although the tone was careless enough.

"Yes, she certainly is a very handsome girl."

"And they say that Mr. Desmond is very much taken with her."

Shannon looked a little surprised at this for he had not noticed Desmond's pursuit of the girl. If he had any notion of the girl, although even to himself he had never admitted that he had, Cool Desmond, the Desperado, was by all odds his formidable rival.

"He is after the girl, is he not?" Iris demanded, finding that Shannon hesitated. "Do not fear to tell me the truth; I will not repeat it, but if the report is true, let Desmond look out for himself for I will hold him to a bitter reckoning!" In her anger the girl had spoken more openly than she had intended, and she perceived by the expression upon Shannon's face that he was amazed. It was too late to retreat, now; so she resolved to confide fully in the young man, trusting to his honor to keep the secret.

"I did not intend to speak quite so freely," she continued, "but since my tongue has betrayed me I hope you will not reveal what I have said to you to any one."

Shannon hastened to assure her that she might rely upon his discretion.

"Desmond has no right to even look at any other girl!" she went on, "and if he dares to play false with me I will make him repent it to the latest day of his life."

"It may not be so," Shannon remarked.

"I will know before I sleep this night," she continued, anger blazing hot within her veins.

And the girl departed, to find Desmond, having, during the brief interview, given the young storekeeper much matter for thought.

From the store she went directly to Desmond's saloon. It was too early in the evening for business, so the gambler was lounging in

the doorway of his "den," talking with a little group of men, prominent among whom was old Lauderdale.

The girl walked directly up to Desmond, never taking the slightest notice of her father.

"I want to speak with you a moment; walk this way!" she said, with the air of a tragedy queen.

The gambler, though both astonished and disgusted, did not dare to refuse. He saw from her manner that she had not come on any pacific mission.

"What is the matter with you, Iris?" he demanded.

"I am crazy with anger!"

"And why?"

"Cannot you guess?"

"Indeed, I cannot."

"Why have you gone after this new girl?"

"I've a certain game to play, and, in order to win—the stake is a big one—I have to keep on friendly terms with this new girl."

"The stake is the girl herself; I understand your game, well enough!" she persisted, bitterly, "but you will not win, no matter how carefully you plan."

"Don't be a fool, Iris; but listen to me. I will tell you all about it, since you must know," but, before he proceeded to explain, he cast a careful glance around, so as to be sure no one was near enough to overhear his words. "You have heard the story of the massacre of Conejos?"

"Yes."

"Well, by rights, there must be a large sum of gold-dust concealed about the old mines, somewhere. Old Conejos had it, and it has never been discovered, so it must still be there, and it is in search of the dust that these pilgrims came into this valley. This brother and sister know the secret, and that hidden gold-dust is exactly what I am after, and that is the reason why I am trying to get on friendly terms with the girl, for I am bound to have that dust, and if I once get hold of it, my beauty, you and I will speedily get out of this."

"And you will take me with you?" the girl asked, doubtfully.

"Why, of course! Hav'n't I given you my word, and don't I think more of you than all the rest of the women in the world, combined?"

"Keep faith with me, for heaven's sake!" the girl pleaded, passionately, "or else I shall be driven to deeds which will bring ruin down on both of our heads."

For a time Desmond had succeeded, but how long would peace continue?

CHAPTER XIX.

A PECULIAR VISION.

It was about ten o'clock at night, and the gentleman from Taos was not in the best of humor. The fame of Cool Desmond, the Desperado, awed him, and he did not hanker after a contest—a trial of strength with such a man, for it was a common saying in the valley that the man who crossed Desmond's path struck a graveyard "lead" instantaneously.

The big fellow was eager for revenge, though, for the slight that had been put upon him, and so, a bright idea came to him; he did not dare to

quarrel with the gambler, but he could go to the "pilgrims" and drop a hint or two in regard to Desmond that would be apt to block his game if he had any designs upon the girl, and the colonel had no doubt that the gambler was "squinting" in that direction.

So, never reflecting upon the lateness of the hour, the colonel started for the cabin of the pilgrims.

To the shanty restaurant of the two strangers he proceeded. A light shone from within, showing that the inmates had not yet retired to rest.

"Now, then, dog my cats, if I don't put a flea into Mr. Desmond's ear," the Taos man muttered, as he knocked at the door.

"Who is there—what do you want?" the voice of the girl demanded.

Then it suddenly occurred to the giant that it was rather an unseasonable hour for a call and that possibly he had alarmed the pilgrims.

"Don't be afeard—it's only me," he assured; "and I'm a reg'lar old side pardner of yourn; I'm the colonel from Taos, and I want to speak to you on very 'ticular business."

"Come to-morrow," answered the girl.

"To-morrow won't do; I shall bu'st if I wait!" exclaimed the Taos man, explosively. "Don't you be afeard; I'm jes' the biggest friend that you have got in this hyer town, and I have come to put you on your guard ag'in' a mean cuss w'ot I reckon will be apt to worry you if he gits a chance."

There was a brief consultation between the two within.

"I recognize the voice," the girl said. "It is that big man who was one of the committee that called upon us."

"Do not let him in, no matter who it is!" begged the boy, nervous with fright.

"Not to-night, please," the girl replied, gently, endeavoring to smooth over the matter. "Come to-morrow and we will gladly listen to what you have to say and thank you from the bottom of our hearts for your kindness."

"Soft words butter no parsnips," the big fellow thought. "But, look-a-here!" he exclaimed aloud, just drunk enough to be obstinate. "I reckon you don't get the right kind of a hang on this hyer thing. I've come for to see you on the most important kind of business. I reckon if you only knew w'ot I have to say you'd fling this durned door open so wide that an elephant could walk in."

But the pilgrims were equally as resolute in their idea of keeping the big fellow as he was to gain admittance, and as they had a most decided advantage on their side, reluctantly he was forced to abandon his mission.

"That is w'ot a gentl'man gits by trying to do a good-natured action," he muttered, as he took his uncertain way back toward the center of the town. "Durned if it ain't enough to make a man eat a mule," and then with a series of hair-raising oaths the giant expressed his disgust at the pilgrims, the camp of Juanapolis, its inhabitants, himself, and in fact the whole world in general. So engrossed did the big loafer become in this pleasing task that he neglected to take his bearings, and walked straight out of the road toward the foot-hills and only woke to a consciousness of his mistake when he stumbled over

a knee-high boulder, which brought him down on all-fours, sprawling.

He lifted his head and looked around him.

And then his eyes fell upon a dark object which was crouching under the lee of a rock some forty or fifty feet off.

The object, whose flank had been turned, so to speak, by the giant's unexpected movement, thinking that it had not been seen owing to the colonel's condition, and anxious to escape discovery, glided quietly from its exposed position and took refuge amid some rocks a little further off.

"W'ot a cat!" he muttered, and, sure enough, the figure wore the likeness of a cat, but a cat of gigantic size—a cat as large as a human and black as the sable robes of night. That he saw as it disappeared, and then he rose slowly to his feet, rubbing his eyes.

The colonel really was alarmed; he fancied that the man-with-the-poker was after him.

"Cats!" he muttered, in sore perplexity; "I never heerd of a man seeing cats afore; it is allers rats or snakes. I'll jest git out of this hyer as quick as I kin."

And he "made tracks" for the hotel at once. He did not attempt to investigate whether it was a cat or not; the one glimpse of it he had caught was quite enough for him.

At the hotel he related to the crowd in the bar-room what he had seen. He expected that the tale would be received with hoots of incredulity, but, on the contrary, the faces of the listeners grew sober. The colonel, a new-comer in the camp, was not as well posted as he might be, but the rest were.

"The Wild-cats are abroad, then," remarked the Doctor, reflectively. "By Jove! that means there will be bloody work somewhere around this camp to-night."

CHAPTER XX.

THE STORY OF THE CATS.

"YES, sir-ee, when you see the Cats abroad by night, it means that there's bloody work ahead," the landlord repeated, and the rest in the room nodded assent with solemn faces.

The man from Taos was astonished.

"What on earth do you mean by all this hyer, anyway?" he cried. "Did I really see a cat for sure? and, gentl'men, you kin tell me that I lie all you please, but that air beast was as big as a mule! I don't expect any one of you to believe me! I wouldn't if any pilgrim tried to wool me with any sich yarn."

"Oh, we know about the cats; you see, you are a new-comer in the camp, and of course you ain't as well posted as you might be," the Doctor explained.

"You don't mean to say that you have got cats in this hyer valley as big as mules?"

"You saw it with your own eyes, didn't you?" the host demanded, and the miners nudged each other as much as to say that this was a knock-down argument.

The Taos man shook his head as though the words had been fists and had played a tattoo upon his skull.

"Wal, I sw'ar, I thought that it was all a kind of a man-with-the-poker game, and that thar wasn't any sich thing," he confessed.

"No, sir; you are all right as far as that is concerned; but to explain: what you saw was a man disguised as a cat."

"The blazes you say!" the giant howled, in disgust; "wal, if I had know'd that I would have jumped for him and clawed him in a minute."

"Yes, there's a regular band of them," the Doctor continued, "and they have been fooling round here off and on ever since the first settlement of this valley—in fact, before the camp had a local habitation and a name."

"And they rig up like cats so that folks won't know who they are?"

"Exactly; my noble Roman, you have hit it!"

"Oh, if I had only a-knowed it!" the giant vociferated; then he spit on his hands and doubled them up. "If I had only a-knowed it, wouldn't I have whaled that Cat!"

"Or got 'wiped out' in trying," suggested the Doctor.

"Will them Cats bite?" the colonel demanded.

"They have left many a bloody mark of their teeth since this hyer camp was new," the other replied. "That chap under the table there could tell you more about them than any man in the camp if he only had his senses," and the speaker pointed to the idiot boy, who lay curled up like a dog, fast asleep, apparently, under one of the tables.

"And w'ot does *he* know about them?" asked the colonel, his curiosity now doubly excited.

"They murdered his father, mother, sisters and brothers, and gave him a crack on the head at the same time that made an idiot of him."

"The Cats did?"

"Well, it was supposed they did; that was the massacre of Conejos."

"Cats—big black Cats? durned if that don't beat me all hollow!" and the colonel brought his hand down with a heavy whack on the table by which he was standing.

The idiot boy started from his slumbers.

"Cats—black Cats!" he cried, repeating the words of the other; "yes, I saw them all—thirteen—thirteen big fellows, and all of them with gleaming knives in their hands! Oh! see their eyes! And there are spirits round me now," he continued, much to the uneasiness of the miners, who glared about them and looked askance at the dark corners of the room as though they expected to see the airy forms of which the boy spoke lurking there.

And the giant from Taos, with open mouth, stared, the most wonder-struck man in the room.

"I see them in their white robes, waving their silver wings!" and the boy's voice was thrillingly low. He moved toward the door with outstretched hands. "They beckon me to follow them; I know what they want! They want me to come with them on the hills under the moon. All right, I am coming!" and then, opening the door he passed out into the night, much to the relief of the crowd, who were naturally superstitious, and did not at all relish this sort of talk. Even after the boy's departure they looked anxiously around them, not quite sure that ghosts were not lurking in the dark recesses of the room.

The big man was the first to break the silence.

"Gentl'men, you may skin me for lariats if this hyer don't beat all that I ever did heer tell on; but, I say, how 'bout this Cat business? Is this hyer camp going to be run over by a parcel of Cats? Are we a lot of dog-goned skunks, for to howl and crawl into our hole, 'cos a few black Cats come a-meowing 'round the town? Not by a jugful, if I know myself, and I think I do. I kin whip my weight in Cats, wild or tame, and I allers could."

"Well, gents, it does seem really rough that these fellows should dare to come right into our town," the Doctor declared.

"Yes, and to walk right over us!" the colonel added, excitedly.

Then up spoke a brawny and grizzled miner, a staid and steady man, one of the solid ones of the camp.

"The kurnel is right, and we mustn't stand it; we must take the war-path and clean 'em out!"

This idea took at once, and every man in the room immediately volunteered. Some one suggested that to appoint a leader was about the proper thing. The gentleman from Taos, with that modesty so characteristic of him, was about to volunteer for the post, when the brawny miner headed him off just as he had got his mouth open by nominating the Doctor, and the approval with which the nomination was received was quite strong enough to convince even the giant, who was not noted for clearness of comprehension, that he stood no show at all.

The Doctor, as a rule, was a quiet man, and rarely bothered himself with anything outside of his own business, but on this occasion he for once broke through his rule and accepted the responsibility.

A bright idea occurred to one of the miners.

"Say, gentl'men, we ought to ring Desmond in on this deal seeing as how he is the boss fighting-man of this deestrick," he suggested.

This took immediately and the crowd proceeded to wait upon the gambler.

By this time it was near midnight, and as it happened to be a dull night as to business the Desperado's Den was on the point of closing up when the miners marched into the saloon.

Desmond was considerably surprised and for a moment apprehensive, for, as the crowd entered, he backed behind the table as if preparing for an attack.

The Doctor acted as spokesman for the crowd, and speedily made known the errand upon which they had come.

But to the surprise of all who had expected that the gambler would only be too eager to join in the "picnic," he declined.

"I ain't lost any cats," he declared, "and am not going to prow round in the dark look for anybody else's; 'sides, I don't take no stock in the yarn, nohow."

This was an aspersion that the Taos man indignantly resented, but the gambler scornfully repeated the remark, and the miners, nettled at his refusal, withdrew.

They were all armed, therefore all prepared for the expedition, so at once they set out.

And then, for the first time, a suspicion of what the object of the marauders was, in entering the town, came to them.

The Cats had been lurking near the cabin occupied by the two pilgrims, the boy and girl! Did they threaten harm to the adopted children of Juanapolis?

CHAPTER XXI. THE SEARCH.

DEEPLY excited were the citizens at the bare thought of mischief threatening the two "babes in the woods," as one of the miners termed the pilgrims.

"Durn my skin if it wouldn't be a 'tarnal shame!" cried the brawny, gray-bearded miner, old Uncle Pete, as he was termed, when one of the crowd suggested that the "Cats" might be prowling around the cabin of the two wanderers with hostile intent.

Each and every one in the band echoed the sentiment, and as for the giant son of Taos he swore with a dozen blood-curdling and decidedly original oaths that he would, single-handed, exterminate all the Cats west of the Mississippi, if a hair of the heads of either of the two was harmed.

But as they approached near to the cabin of the pilgrims the Doctor commanded silence.

"Let us know when we are pretty near the spot where you saw the fellow skulking," the leader of the party remarked to Taos.

A hundred yards further on the giant came to a halt, and the rest of the party guessing from the action that they were near the place of action, halted also.

"There, Doc, the cuss was, jes' over by them big rocks," Taos said, in a hoarse whisper, while all clustered around the Doctor, grasped the trusty revolvers which they carried, ready cocked, and gazed with inquiring eyes at the point indicated.

A shrill, sharp whistle rung out clear on the still night air!

The miners looked at each other amazed, not knowing what to make of the sound, but before any one of the party could make any remark, again it sounded, shrill and sharp as before.

It was evidently a signal. Two sharp whistles in quick succession, and the sound came from the rear—from the center of the town.

"Hallo! what does that mean?" quoth the Doctor; "is it a warning to our game to make themselves scarce?"

"If it is so the Cats must have a spy right in the town," Uncle Pete observed.

"Spread out and advance; we'll soon find 'em!" the Doctor commanded.

The command was obeyed with alacrity, but the leader of the party was wrong in his prognostication; they did not soon find out, for they had no success but their labor for their pains.

After a fruitless search over, the miners gathered a few paces from the pilgrim shanty.

"These fellows are too much for us," the Doctor observed, sagely. "Those whistles are a signal for them to get up and dust, I reckon, and if it is so, why, the Cats have got a spy and a spy right in the camp."

But while the miners had been occupied in their fruitless search the doubting words of the scoffer, Desmond, had occurred to them. Had the giant from Taos really seen anything like the big black Cat which he had described, or

was it all a coinage of an imagination heated by potent fire-water?

The colonel was noted for big stories, wonderful yarns of wonderful adventures by flood and field; in fact, was the biggest liar south of Denver—an accomplishment which he was really proud to claim.

Therefore no one of the party was taken by surprise when old Uncle Pete shoved his big fist under the nose of the giant and shook it menacingly.

"You long-legged, mule-headed, p'ison son of a perarie skunk! you lied when you said that you see'd a Cat a-prowling 'round hyer!" the old man exclaimed. "You lied, and you know you lied, you whisky-soaked, animated keg, you!"

"So help me Bob, I was giving it to you as straight as a string!" the colonel protested.

"You lie—you know you do! You lie so much that you can't tell the truth when you want to!" the other retorted. "And you were drunk, too; you are drunk, now; you couldn't see a hole through a forty-foot ladder, if there wasn't any rounds into it! A Cat! Oh, get out! You couldn't tell a cat from a mule ten yards off, the way you are now!"

"I kin fight any man in the crowd, hyer, w'ot says that I didn't see a Cat!" he avowed, doubling up his huge fists, and shaking them in a defiant manner.

"Mebbe you kin, but that don't prove that you did see one," responded the old man doggedly.

"Well, whether you did or not, it is quite plain that we are not going to see one," the Doctor interposed. "So, the quicker we get back to town the better," he continued.

"Keepin' us out of our bunks, the mule-headed mutton-jack!" old Pete muttered, with revengeful looks at the colonel, who was terribly put out by the complete failure that had been made.

"Hol' on!" cried the giant, abruptly, an idea getting into his thick head, "who knows but w'ot them Cats have gone through the cabin and carried the kids off already, afore we come?"

The miners stared at each other for a moment, for they understood that there might be something in this, and the Doctor was quick to act upon it.

"I will soon settle that question," he announced, and then he marched up to the door of the cabin and knocked.

No light was burning within to indicate that the inmates had not retired to rest, but it was soon evident that the two were not fast in slumber's chain, for the voice of the girl, who was plainly startled by the summons, inquired:

"Who is there?"

"Don't be alarmed, miss, it is only a party of friends," the Doctor replied, in his blandest tones. "Don't you recognize my voice? I am the Doctor; we heard that there was some suspicious characters prowling around the camp to-night, so a party of us came up to see if you were all safe."

"Oh, yes," replied the girl, much relieved, when she discovered who her questioner was; "no one has troubled us at all."

"You must excuse us for disturbing you, but we felt a little alarmed, and thought we had

better come up and see if everything was all right."

"Oh, you are very kind, indeed!" the girl responded, gratefully. "Every one is so kind to us here, that I fear we never shall be able to express how grateful we are."

"Well, good-night, miss; sorry to have disturbed you," and the Doctor retreated, followed by the rest.

The Taos man marched along with his nose up in the air, dogged, defiant, and ugly, regardless of the sly jokes perpetrated at his expense. He couldn't very well fight the whole gang, as he remarked, but, if any one or two men wanted to maul him on the Cat question, he was their mutton.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE DANGER COMES.

IN thirty minutes' time after, the miners were all safe in their bunks; not a light burned in the valley, not a solitary miner was astir.

But all within the valley's confines were not buried in slumber. Within the cabin of the pilgrims, the two strangers around whose past career such a mystery clung, the brother and sister, held busy and anxious converse.

The boy lay upon the bunk. By the side of the rude bunk knelt the girl.

Could their features have been seen, upon the white face of the lad despair strangely commingled with desperation would plainly have been traced, while the girl's countenance betrayed signs of anguish but not of alarm.

"I tell you that we are in deadly peril!" the boy exclaimed, excitedly, glaring around him in the darkness as though he expected to see a foe start forth from each corner.

"No, no; it is only your imagination," the girl assured, soothingly.

"Oh, no, it is not! Why do you talk to me as if I was only a child?" the other retorted. "I tell you I feel danger in the very air around us. I feel exactly the same as on that dreadful night, the events of which sent us forth wanderers into the world."

"Heaven knows that it is not my wish to blame you or to speak harshly in regard to your acts," the girl observed, slowly and solemnly, but I am sure that if you were less impulsive—less given to acting upon the thought of the moment, it would be far better for both of us."

"Am I to blame?" the boy cried, in a very irritable and defiant way. "I am as Heaven made me and I cannot help it. I am not cool and calculating as you are; it is not my nature, nor can I submit to wrong without attempting to avenge myself."

"Ah, that is exactly where the trouble is; it is better to submit, to endure in patience, sometimes, than to resist."

"You are too good for this world!" he exclaimed. "You are a saint and should be translated straight into Heaven, but I, on the contrary, am only a poor, weak, erring mortal, and, mortal-like, when I am trodden upon, it is my nature to resist."

"Oh, but see what a terrible amount of misery your rash action has caused us!" the other cried, impetuously, unable to refrain from

expressing in words the thoughts which crowded so thickly upon her brain. "If you had only restrained yourself—if you had only temporized, we would not now be what we are—wanderers upon the face of the world, depending entirely upon the kindness of strangers for the very bread we eat."

"I am accursed!" the boy wailed, excitedly; "bitter bad fortune must have sat in my house of life when I was born, and the evil influence has followed me ever since."

"Do not say so; I am sure it is not so," the girl asseverated, softly.

"And yet, I tell you it was an evil hour when fortune led our wandering footsteps this way; I am sure of it, and nothing but misfortune will come of it!" the boy persisted, in the feverish, excited way which was such a strange contrast to the calm, hopeful tones of the girl. "We ought to have heeded the warning of the idiot before we descended into the valley, and have turned our steps in another direction."

"We would have been very foolish to heed the ravings of that poor boy whose mind is so sadly distraught. His warning was but idle words. He did not know us—could not know us, nor from whence we came, nor why we fled. How then could he warn us?"

"Many folks believe that such idiots, deprived of reasoning powers, acquire an instinct that seems almost supernatural," the boy remarked. "The idiot could not have known us as you say; and yet, he spoke of dangers from which we had escaped, and warned us of dangers to come."

"Idle words—nothing but idle words; he talks so to every one; do not all tell us so?"

"Yes," admitted the boy, who was resolute in not allowing conviction to take hold of him; "but this dreadful massacre, the bare mention of which freezes my blood with horror every time I hear it mentioned!"

"Well, what is that to us? What do we know of it?"

"True indeed; what do we know of it; but why should this Desmond think that we know something of it? Why should the outlaw who assumes the strange disguise of a cat believe that we possess a knowledge of the secrets of the old ruined ranch?"

"I cannot tell—it is a deep mystery to me," the girl confessed, after giving the subject a few minutes' thoughtful consideration.

"And therefore I tell you there is danger in it for us!" the other again repeated. "There is nothing left for us but to fly if we would escape the peril that is hanging over us."

"It is impossible, we cannot go," she replied, firmly.

"It is madness to remain!"

"Life is as sweet to me as to any one, I suppose, and yet, sometimes I think it would have been better for us both to have died, when death was so near, rather than have lived the life we have been obliged to live since that time," and the girl spoke slowly and sorrowfully.

"I will not die while I can cling to life," the other declared. Then he suddenly reached out his hand and caught the girl by the wrist. "Hush!" he cried, excitedly, "what was that? Did you not hear something?"

The two listened attentively, and so still was the night that they could plainly hear the sound of their own breathing, which seemed terribly loud.

"I do not hear anything," the girl whispered, after quite a long pause. "What was it like?"

"Some one stepping cautiously outside the cabin door."

Again the two listened intently, but the sound—if sound indeed there had been—did not again come to the ears of the boy.

"Oh, I am going crazy, I believe!" he muttered. "I do not hear a single sound now, and yet I would have sworn that I heard the noise of stealthy footsteps outside the door."

"You are excited, and your imagination is overwrought. Lie down and try to sleep; in the morning you will doubtless be better."

With a subdued moan, the boy fell back on the bed. He closed his eyes; all was still as the stillness of the grave, and the girl believed that rest at last was at hand. Then in this dead and quiet calm, there came a sound from without that caused both of the anxious pair to start in affright.

It was the sound of a hoarse whisper that came as distinctly on the clear, still air of the night as a loud command would have done by day.

"Now, all together, boys, one, two, three!"

There was a heavy shock, and the cabin door, burst from its fastenings, came rolling into the room.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A MYSTERIOUS SHOT.

THE boy sat bolt upright in the bunk, and with blazing eyes grabbed a revolver, but the girl, anticipating just such a movement as this on his part, threw both her arms around him, thus practically rendering him incapable of carrying out the desperate purpose which he contemplated.

"Let me go!" he shouted.

"No, no, I will not; yield, resistance is madness!"

Into the room came the assailants who had crushed in the door with a heavy log as the battering-ram, and through the doorway the rays of the moon came, thus partially lighting the apartment. Although this light was dim, the eyes of the pilgrims, accustomed to the darkness, saw clearly enough nine well-armed men, and each and every one habited in the strange Cat dress!

The leader of the Cat band, the first to enter the room, quickly perceived what was going on.

"Oho! he's got a barker, has he?" he cried; "let him go, gal, and let him try to use the weapon, if he dares! I reckon that a lick in the head will take all that nonsense out of him."

"Oh, do not harm him, sir; he will not attempt to resist," pleaded the girl, who, by this time, had got her hand on the revolver, and with a violent effort wrenched it from the boy's grasp and, exhausted by the effort he had made, as well as overcome by the excitement, the boy's strength forsook him, and he sunk back in a dead faint upon the bunk.

"What is the matter with him?" demanded the Cat leader.

"He has fainted, sir!"

"How soon will he come out of this?" he asked. "We want you to go along with us, but we can't bother to lug him if he can't walk."

"Why do you wish us to go—what do you want of us?"

"You know the secret of Conejos, and that secret we must know," the ruffian chief declared coming a step nearer.

"Indeed, I know nothing of it," she murmured.

"So you said before, but I take the liberty to doubt that statement," the outlaw retorted.

"Oh, why will you not believe me when I assure you that I do not know anything of the matter of which you speak?" she cried, in anguish, the big pearly tears streaming down her cheek.

The Cat leader shook his head.

"Come," he said, "we are wasting time, and time and tide wait for no man; we must be off to our mountain home before any of the camp galoots wake up, for they might not relish this little surprise-party of ours. How long will it take you to fetch this boy to his senses?"

"Oh, not long, sir; a few minutes only!" she hastened to exclaim, fearful that the outlaw might change his mind and do violence to the youth.

"All right; go ahead with you, and be as fast as you can, for we have no time to lose. One of you fellows stand in the doorway and keep a good lookout, for we don't want our little picnic hyer surprised."

The biggest and burliest Cat of them all immediately took up a position in the doorway, from which he easily commanded a view of the sleeping town.

The girl, in great trepidation, unloosed the flannel-shirt of the boy at the neck and proceeded to chafe his hands and wrists.

Quick to fall into a faint, the boy was almost equally quick to recover from it.

In a few moments he began to show signs of life; then he opened his eyes languidly, and for a moment looked vacantly around him. Soon he caught sight of the evil-looking outlaws in their horrid disguises, and a violent shudder shook his frame.

"Get up and come along with us!" ordered the outlaw captain.

"Oh, sir, he will do as you say—we will both do as you say if you will not harm us!" assured the girl.

"Get up, for it is time we were off; morning is near at hand and we mustn't be caught by any of the early birds of the town."

By this time the boy was on his feet and the two stood clinging together, their arms around each other, the perfection of helplessness.

"Come along and come quietly," the outlaw warned. "Don't attempt to escape, or try any gum games on us, for it won't do you the least bit of good. Is the coast all clear?" to the man in the doorway.

"All O. K., captain," the sentinel replied.

"Three of you get in the rear and the rest on the sides of our birds hyer," the chief commanded.

The men did as ordered, and the outlaw turned to depart, when—

Crack!

Out shrill on the air rung the short quick bark of a revolver, startling the outlaws.

"Aha, who fired that shot?" the Cat leader cried, he and all the rest preparing on the instant for battle.

The sentinel at the door only wheeled slowly half around, and with a heavy thud came down on the floor, all in a heap.

Disregarding the two prisoners, and anticipating that they were caught in a trap, with drawn revolvers the Cats leaped over the body of their comrade and rushed through the door.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AN UNSEEN FOE.

PELL-MELL out of the door of the cabin the outlaws poured, each and every man expecting that a bloody fight awaited him on the outside.

They believed that the miners had stolen in upon them and were prepared to cut off their retreat to the hills.

Judge of their astonishment when, upon reaching the open air, the bandits were unable to discover the slightest trace of a foe!

In blank dismay the outlaws stared around them and then upon each other. What did it mean? Their comrade had been slain right before their eyes, stricken down upon his post without even a chance for his life.

The chief was the first to recover his wits, and upon his mind there suddenly flashed the remembrance of the secret slayer who had already touched, with his bloody and withering hand, so many of the outlaw band.

It was this mysterious foe who had done this deed.

"Quick! Examine and see whar he got his wound," the chief commanded; "then we must be off, for the pistol-shot will wake some of the miners up, and if we get the town after us the boys will be apt to make it lively afore we get out."

The order was obeyed; the outlaws clustered around the body of the dead man, and, as the Cat leader had expected, he had been shot through the head, right above and a little in advance of the ear!

The outlaws glared around them as they stood by the body, each man with his hand on his cocked revolver, yet every one of them believing that the foe who haunted them was one against whom mortal weapons would be of no avail.

"I reckon this hyer little job will cause some talk to-morrow morning," the outlaw said, "and the first thing you know they will be laying all these mysterious doin's at the door of the Cats, but that won't hurt us much."

The ruffian was right, for when the body was discovered in the morning it did create a great deal of excitement, not only from the peculiar wound which had caused the death, but because the man was one of the best-known citizens of the place, although never bearing the best of characters.

"Come on! We'll get out while we are healthy; fall in, you pilgrims!" the leader commanded, savagely, and away went the party, the chief at the head, behind him the brother

and sister, guarded on both sides, and the rest of the band in the rear.

But the surprises of that night and morning were not yet over, for, scarcely had the party traversed a hundred yards when again the short, quick bark of the revolver rung out, clear and shrill.

All but one in the party dodged in alarm, the pilgrims excepted, and that one sunk down struggling in the agonies of death.

The silent slayer had chosen to take two victims this night instead of one!

The Cats were in a dilemma; they did not know what to do. The unseen and terrible foe might be in their front, or in the rear, or on either flank; the man who had suffered had been in the rear, but this did not indicate that the avenger was there, also.

A few seconds only had the Cats paused, panic-stricken and bewildered, not knowing what to do, when rudely were they roused from their stupor.

Another shot rung out on the night air; another man went down, mortally wounded.

The outlaws awoke from their bewilderment. If the first shot had turned them into statues the second report transformed them into fleet-footed runners who would not have disgraced any race-track in the known world.

There was no need of orders; there was no thought of the prisoners whom they had taken so much pains to secure; there was only one wild idea, and that was to get away from the spot upon which they stood, as speedily as possible. They spread out from the common center where they had stood like the rays of a fan, but one and all heading toward the hills and running for dear life!

The brother and sister were saved—strangely saved, and they knew not whom to thank; but, in their cabin, on bended knees, they prayed to Heaven to reward their preserver, whoever he might be.

CHAPTER XXV.

DESMOND SHOWS HIS TEETH.

OF course when the morning came and the inhabitants of the town awoke to a knowledge of what had taken place, wonder was intense. Nothing had ever occurred in Juanapolis since it became Juanapolis which so stirred the public heart.

Now that they had seen the two bodies dressed up in the Cat disguise, a terrible conviction began to spread around—that the outlaws, the Wild-cats, had their home and harborage right in the camp of Juanapolis!

And when the citizens reflected upon this and remembered how many bloody deeds had been traced directly to the outlaws since the building up of the town, beginning with the horrible massacre of Conejos, they began gravely to deliberate whether a little taste of Judge Lynch wouldn't be a good thing for Death Valley.

Suspicion was rampant; distrust was visible upon almost every face. Every man looked at his neighbor with an inquiring glance, as much as to say: "Are *you* one of the Cats? If you are, the quicker you get out of this town the healthier it will be for you."

Of course, Desmond, being the head sporting

man of the city, with his boldly displayed and apparently defiant sign, "The Desperado's Den," came in for the principal share of this.

Desmond, ignorant of the strength and extent of the gathering storm, made light of these threats when they were reported to him and said, cool and careless as ever:

"Oh, I reckon it won't be much of a rain, anyway," and not in the best of humors, this affair did not tend to improve the gambler's temper.

He had heard that morning some idle gossip concerning young Shannon's attentions to the girl pilgrim, and a careless remark dropped in his hearing, that it was ten to one Shannon got the "gal," for he was "such a polite cuss," and had befriended the two upon their arrival in the town, greatly annoyed him.

He had imagined that he would have an easy task to win the prize, for he did not think the camp held a possible rival, but, in some way he had strangely overlooked the young storekeeper.

Shannon was a good-looking young fellow, with a pleasing address, fully his equal in every respect, and, perhaps, his superior, when his profession was counted in, for the world at large has a prejudice against men who follow cards for a living, although this prejudice is not particularly strong in the Western mining regions.

"I must go and see him; I must interview my bold storekeeping sharp, and make him show his hand!" he declared, at the wind-up of his meditations. "Mebbe, though, I won't be able to make much of him, for, if he finds I am on the war-path, he will probably crawfish, and try to get out of it easy, for I reckon he ain't the man to stand up boldly for his game."

Whether the gambler, with all his acuteness, had hit Roland Shannon's character off correctly, the reader will soon see. These desperado kind of fellows often mistake quietness for cowardice.

Shannon was in his store, and, as it happened, alone, when Desmond entered.

From the peculiar look upon the gambler's face, Shannon suspected his mission was not a pleasant one.

"See hyer, Shannon, I want a word or two with you!" Desmond opened, rather roughly approaching the young man, who sat on the counter, reading a newspaper.

"Certainly," the young man replied, as pleasantly as though he thought the gambler came on a friendly visit.

"See hyer, Shannon, how many gals do you want?" he demanded, in a very offensive manner.

The storekeeper looked surprised at the question.

"I do not exactly understand you."

"When you came sneaking after the Lauderdale gal, I didn't mind, for I'm tired of her, anyway, and would be glad to get shut of her, but, with this stranger, the case is different. I have made up my mind that she suits me, and, as I hear that you have been kinder fooling round her, I thought I would come up and explain matters to you, and tell you to stop."

"And, suppose that I don't stop?"

"Why, then you and I will have trouble."

Shannon looked the gambler straight in the

eye, and, from the peculiar expression upon the young storekeeper's face, Desmond saw, for the first time, that he had made a mistake; the man was game to the backbone.

"Sir, we will have trouble."

"There is a nice little quiet spot down the valley, just around the bend in the creek."

"I know the place, sir."

"Well, I will stroll down there, and you can follow in a little while, so as not to excite suspicion. We don't want to let the hull town into this thing, you know."

"Oh, no; there is no necessity for that."

The gambler strolled out of the town slowly, along down by the "crick," until he passed the bend which hid the town from his sight.

In five minutes Shannon took the same road.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE DUEL.

"A BETTER place than this hyer, for a couple of gentlemen to settle a leetle difficulty, couldn't be found in all this territory," the gambler remarked as Shannon came up to him.

"And, I tell you, I was right glad you made up your mind to toe the scratch so promptly. I rather reckoned from the way you have carried sail since you came to the camp, that you might show the white feather if you were forced to the scratch."

A peculiar look appeared on the young man's face and a peculiar light shone in his eyes.

"You really excite my curiosity. Will you pardon me if I ask how you would have made me fight if I had not chosen to do so?"

"Oh, that would have been easy enough," the other replied, carelessly. "I would have slapped your face, or pulled your nose, or have done something of that kind to kinder raise your courage up to the sticking point."

"Well, I tell you, Mr. Desmond, it is a lucky thing for you that you didn't try that sort of thing on me," Shannon remarked, very quietly, "for right behind the counter on which I was sitting, within easy reach of my hand, was a good stout club, which I keep in reserve expressly for emergencies, and if you had attempted to try either of the two games you mentioned I should have promptly knocked you down with that club, and then I would have welted you until there wasn't a whole bone in your body."

Desmond looked askance at Shannon's muscular form. He had begun the conversation with the idea of making the storekeeper lose his temper, but had made a miserable failure; not only had he not succeeded in ruffling Shannon, but he had become ruffled himself.

"You have got your tools with you, I suppose?" he hastened to inquire, eager to get to work and end the suspense.

"Yes," and the other drew his weapon from its holster.

"Enough said! Suppose you take your stand by that clump of bushes by the crick thar, and I will post myself by the big rock yonder."

Shannon nodded; the two points indicated were about a hundred yards apart.

Both men reached their stations at about the same moment.

"Well, are you ready, squire?" Desmond called out.

"All ready," was the calm reply.

The two men stepped out toward each other.

Desmond, advancing with the grim determination of the desperado, was only anxious to give the gambler a lesson which should last him for some time.

Soon the two were within range, and the gambler, raising his weapon, took deliberate aim at his foe, but the trusted finger of his good right arm was not destined to pull a trigger that day, for as he raised the weapon to the level of his shoulder, out on the air rung the sharp, quick report of a pistol, and with a sudden cry of pain Desmond dropped the revolver as though it had sudden'y become red-hot and burnt his hand.

Shannon, in astonishment, paused; he heard the shot, saw the revolver fall and then saw the good right arm of the gambler drop to his side, apparently helpless.

"Oh, you infernal snake!" he cried. "This is your game, is it? You have got some one to hide in the bush so as to assassinate me without letting me get a fair chance for a crack at you?"

"Upon my life I know no more about the matter than you do!" he protested. "Are you hurt?"

"The accursed villain has put a bullet right through my wrist," raising the helpless arm by means of the other hand. "My right hand, too. If you haven't a hand in it, it is mighty strange."

"As I am a living man, I swear that I have not! See! the smoke is curling from that little clump of bushes on your right, so the shot must have come from there; but I will soon find out," and Shannon rushed at once, in headlong haste, toward the bushes from which indeed a little white smoke was curling upward.

CHAPTER XXVII.

SERIOUS QUESTIONS.

THE suspicious gambler, quick to think evil of every one, had believed that he had been entrapped and had fallen the victim of a superior wit, but Shannon's prompt action somewhat puzzled him; and then, too, if his life had been sought, why had not the marksman put a ball through his heart instead of through his wrist?

He picked up his revolver with his left hand; then he followed slowly after the other.

Shannon speedily reached the clump of bushes almost before the white and curling rings of smoke had died away, but, although the grass was pressed down, showing that some heavy body had reposed there, there was not the slightest indication to show whether an animal or a human had reposed upon the spot.

Desmond came round the other side of the bushes, a look of suspicion upon his face. As he had advanced he had bound his handkerchief round his wrist, striving to stop the flow of blood from the ugly wound.

The look of surprise upon Shannon's face was evidently a genuine one, and Desmond, a good judge of human nature, in his mind acquitted him of any knowledge of the affair.

"Some one has evidently laid in ambush here, but whoever it was he has got off, and left no trail as far as I can see," Shannon remarked, as the other came upon the scene.

"Some secret foe, curse him!" cried Desmond, bitterly, "and he has disabled me for life."

Hardly had the words escaped from his lips, when, round the bend in the trail came a crowd of armed men.

The miners came straight on and surrounded Desmond, and then, with leveled weapons, they bade him give up his arms.

The gambler was amazed, for, although some subtle instinct had warned him when the posse made its appearance that it boded no good to him, yet he was not at all prepared for this demand.

"What do you mean?" he cried; "why should I give up my weapons, and by what right do you demand them? I reckon that things have come to a pretty pass in this hyer valley if two gentlemen can't go out for a leetle amusement without a crowd coming and interfering—and why don't you go for his arms, too?"

"You are our mutton," replied the Doctor, who was apparently in command of the party. "The fact is, Desmond, the Vigilantes are up and the camp is going to be purified."

For a moment Desmond glared defiantly around him and laid his hand upon the butt of his revolver as if he meditated resistance even despite the fearful odds against him, but, he was "covered" by a dozen weapons, and, from the earnest faces behind the glittering tubes of death, he understood that the crowd meant "business," and that resistance was useless.

"There are the tools!" he exclaimed, angrily, casting down his weapons upon the ground, "but I reckon you wouldn't have got them so easily if you had only given me half a show."

"That is exactly our game; we don't calculate to give such men as you are any show, for we ain't anxious to have any more funerals in the town at present," the Doctor answered. In obedience to a sign from him a couple of the miners advanced with a lariat, evidently with the intention of binding Desmond's arms.

The gambler started as he beheld this and the big veins upon his temples swelled out like whipcords.

"Hallo! what do you mean? You are not going to tie me with a lariat like a horse-thief, are you?"

"Desmond, the charge against you is a deuced sight more serious than horse-stealing," the Doctor announced.

"Charge ag'in' me? and what is it?"

"You are suspected of being the man who has committed all these secret murders, lately, which have so horrified the camp."

"Oh, what utter, cursed nonsense!" the gambler cried, much more annoyed than frightened. "What do I know about them? What reason had I to kill the men? I was on good terms with every one of them, and I didn't do it to plunder them, for nary one of them had his valuables touched."

"Well, we ain't got much proof, that is a fact," the Doctor admitted, "but we have gone for you on suspicion."

"I reckon that I can clear myself, so start ahead as soon as you please."

Desmond submitted to be bound and all marched back to the camp.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE BREAK-UP.

ANOTHER day had come and gone.

The Vigilantes had completely succeeded in their mission, and without the slightest semblance of a struggle, the town had been purified. The birds and beasts of prey, the vultures and the jackals, all had taken flight when warned so to do, with the exception of three prominent men whom the citizens had placed in durance vile under suspicion of being connected with the mysterious murders which had so alarmed the town.

And now, as the night drew on apace, from a wooden eminence high up above Death Valley, the five remaining Cats sat in council and looked down upon the town.

Quite a contrast these nervous, gloomy, fearful men, anxiously peering about them and ready to start at the slightest sound, fearing the coming of the deadly foe who had made such havoc in their band, to the bold and reckless ruffians who had lorded it over the valley.

"Well, boys, what is it to be?" asked the Cat leader, uneasily, for he had an idea that some of the band meditated giving leg-bail, thus breaking up the party.

"Come! what do you say, No. 1—what do you think about it?"

"Oh, I don't know what to think," the man replied with a shake of the head. "In fact, I am willing to think exactly as you think."

"Them's my sentiments exactly!" remarked No. 2.

But the other two shook their heads in a manner which indicated that they had an opinion of their own, and upon the outlaw leader fixing his eyes inquiringly upon them, they proceeded to ventilate it.

"The thing is played out; better give it up and git out while our skins are whole!" No. 4 declared.

"Yes, that is so; what is the use of trying to fight ag'in' this thing? It can't be done," No. 5 continued. "Just look at what has happened already. There were thirteen of us in the first place—how many now?"

"Five!" responded his comrade.

"Eight of us have been wiped out, and all on them in exactly the same way; now, don't it look reasonable that, if we keep on, all of us will be served the same? I have got jest as much sand as any man in Colorado, but I ain't really hankering for any more of this in mine."

"Nor me neither," added the other.

The sentiments of the party were now clearly defined. Two were willing to abide by their leader's decision while the other two were for quitting as soon as possible.

The outlaw captain had a purpose in view, and he required the assistance of all of the band to carry it out, so he made an effort to win them over to his views.

"Well, boys, I about agree with you that the jig is up, but, I should like to make one big strike before I quit, so as to have something handsome to quit on."

All of them nodded in approval at this; the idea pleased them.

"Thar's a heap of dust hid up in the old

Conejos Mine somewhars, if we could only find out whar it is."

"Captain, you must really excuse us!" the spokesman responded; "we have got enough. We want to cry quits, now, right to once, if you won't think it hard."

The other man fully agreed with this sentiment, and so expressed himself, and the outlaw leader, fully realizing that it was useless to attempt to change their opinions, did not try.

They shook hands all around, and then the conference broke up. Two of them followed the Cat leader, while the other two struck off to the northward, following a little blind trail, almost imperceptible to the eye. After twenty minutes' walk they came to a little ravine, dotted all over with huge boulders and little clumps of pines.

In the ravine the two halted, stripped off their Cat disguises, and then, rolling them up into a bundle, thrust them into a little cavity in the rocks, the mouth of which was hidden by a fringe of bushes, and which had evidently been made use of by the outlaws before. From the cavity the two drew out their hats, and one of them a jacket, which he immediately proceeded to put on.

The two then advanced to the mouth of the ravine, and looked down, in a reflective sort of way, at the camp, which, seemingly, was sleeping in the moonlight, for it was too far off for even a wonderfully far-seeing eye to distinguish any movement in the streets.

"Well, I reckon that we don't either of us want anything more of this hyer camp," one of them remarked.

"Nary thing more," the other agreed.

"Let's be getting, then, while our skins are whole, for I reckon this hyer region ain't as healthy for us as it might be. I tell you what it is, old man, that Conejos business was a mistake; we have had mighty little luck since then, and I've a sort of an idea that this cuss who has bin a-laying our boys out right and left, a sort of come from that air affair."

"Mebbe so; but, let's be traveling."

"Good-by, Juanapolis!" cried the other, but, hardly had the words left his lips, when the sharp report of a pistol rung out on the night air, and, with a hollow groan, the man staggered, and then, throwing up his hands with a convulsive gasp, went down on his face, dead.

For a moment his companion stood like a statue and gazed stupefied upon his comrade, stricken down so suddenly. He understood, well enough, what had happened, despite the abruptness of the affair. The secret slayer had tracked them! Recovering from the dreadful terror that had fallen upon him, he drew his pistol from his belt and bounded away.

Vain was the effort to escape, for, not ten steps had he taken when another shot rung out, clear and sharp, and the groan of a dying man followed as the outlaw threw up his hands, clawing the air in mortal agony, and then went down, lifeless.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"THERE WERE THIRTEEN—"

IN blissful unconsciousness of the fate that awaited their comrades, and never for an in-

stant dreaming that their doom was so near at hand, the outlaw leader and his two devoted companions went on their way to the cabin of the two pilgrims.

"S'posin' this cuss who has already made it so warm for us is on the lookout ag'in?" one of the ruffians asked.

"I am just calculating on the chance that he ain't," the Cat leader assured. "Lightning don't strike twice in the same place very often, you know, and I am acting on that idea."

In approaching the cabin of the brother and sister they used the utmost caution. First they scouted all around it in the most careful manner, so as to be satisfied no one was lying in wait in the neighbordood, but not a soul was to be seen.

As the outlaw leader had calculated, the secret foe was not lying in wait this time.

"The coast is clear, boys," the captain announced, "and we can make an easy job of it this time, if we can only get admission to the house, and I have a plan which I think will induce the girl to open the door. Come on."

The outlaw walked boldly up to the house, but with hurried footsteps as though he came in haste, the others treading with catlike caution in his footsteps.

"Miss Brown, open the door, quick!" he exclaimed, in his natural tones, as he knocked at the portal; "Mr. Shannon has been badly hurt down-town and he wants to see you immediately."

The scheme was planned with fiendish cunning. Shannon to the girl was the one true friend whom she respected—whom she loved, although she did not confess this, even to herself, and the moment she heard that he was hurt apprehension for his safety overcame her fear of danger, and she immediately proceeded to unbar the door, despite the remonstrances of her companion, who, with cocked revolver in hand, declared that danger threatened.

But the girl was deaf to fear now, and without paying the least regard to the other's words, she opened the door only to fall back with a smothered scream of terror as the horrid images of the Cats appeared.

The scream was re-echoed by the boy, and in his wild despair, despite the brandished knife in the hand of the outlaw leader, he leveled his revolver full at the intruder and fired.

The escape of the Cat captain from instant death was almost miraculous, for the pistol was so near that the flash of the powder burnt his eyebrows, but the boy, in his delirium of fear, had not taken aim, but the ball came so near the outlaw's head that it passed through the side of the Cat mask.

Startled by the unexpected peril from which he had so narrowly escaped, and perceiving that the boy was raising the hammer with the evident intention of trying again, the outlaw sprang forward, and with a single blow struck him dead.

For a moment the girl stood statue-like, transfixed with horror, and then, with a loud scream, she threw herself upon the body.

"Oh, sister—oh, Mary!" she cried, in heart-rending accents, and then fainted dead away,

apparently as fully bereft of life as the mangled form to which she clung.

This wild cry, in part, explained the mystery which had hung around the supposed boy, and accounted for his fear, nervousness and generally flighty behavior. The boy's dress covered the figure of a girl!

"A woman, eh?" cried the outlaw chief, who now regretted the haste with which he had acted. "Curse the jade! What did she want to fly at me like a tiger for? You take the girl, Pete; she is light, and you can easily carry her."

"Oh, yes, I reckon I kin tote her all right," and the outlaw, raising the girl from the floor, supported her in his burly arms.

"Now for the mountains," the ruffian chief ordered, as the party passed through the door; but only fifteen or twenty steps had they proceeded, when the sharp revolver-crack was heard, and down went the ruffian in the rear, with a hollow groan.

The "Cats" knew well enough what this portended. Panic-stricken, the burly ruffian dropped the senseless form of the girl, but the avenger's bullet was quicker far than he, and, even before he could start to run, again the revolver spoke, and again the dying groan of anguish announced the result.

No braver man than the Cat chief, but, it was not in human nature to brave such a foe, therefore no discredit to the outlaw that he took to his heels, expecting each instant to hear the terrible death-note of the pistol; but, another fate was in store for him than to perish on that spot, in silence and alone.

Instead of a revolver report there was a whizzing of something hurtling through the air, and suddenly the loop of a lasso coiled itself like a deadly serpent around his neck, flexible as silk, but strong as steel. Instantly the noose tightened, and he was flung so violently to the ground that he was stunned to insensibility.

Then from the covert glided a dark form. Rapidly he advanced to the fallen man, carefully removed his weapons, and with the lariat bound his hands securely together. From the shed stable at the back of the cabin he now brought the ill-looking little mule, which, as the reader will remember, was used to transport the ill-fated disguised girl into Death Valley. The avenger placed the still insensible outlaw astride of the mule, and bound him in a wonderful manner, so that he could not possibly fall or get off.

This completed, he carefully raised the girl in his arms and carried her into the cabin, and placed her within the bunk. Then returning, he took the bridle of the mule and set off toward the center of the town.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE LAST OF THE CATS.

THE town had been in a fever of excitement all day long, over the stirring events which had taken place, and therefore at night the hotel and its vicinity were well-peopled. The hotel was the headquarters of the Vigilantes, and in one of the rooms Desmond had been confined.

The citizens were in something of a quandary

regarding the gambler, who stoutly protested that he was innocent of all wrong-doing.

Public opinion was pretty well divided in regard to the gambler; some of the miners thought that he ought to be hung, anyway, as a sort of an example, while others declared that he wasn't any worse than any of the rest, and that if he was banished from the camp it would be ample punishment.

But about eleven o'clock that night a discovery was made which at once turned the current of public sentiment strongly against the cool and resolute sport.

Desmond had managed to escape, and the armed guard had gone off with him!

Instant pursuit was advocated, and while the excited miners, gathered in front of the hotel, were discussing the subject, down through the moonlit street came a spectacle that at once excited great attention—of a person leading a mule, while on the back of the animal sat the strangest figure the streets of the mining-camp had ever seen, that of a huge black cat, apparently bound securely to the steed.

The "procession" halted right in front of the hotel, and the crowd, forming a circle around the three, stared in wonder.

The Doctor as the chief of the Vigilantes took it upon himself to question the meaning of the masquerade.

It was the idiot boy who led the mule and he laughed his peculiar idiotic laugh as the question was asked.

"The chief Cat; all the rest are dead," he replied.

And then through the minds of the bystanders came a glimmering of the truth. The Cat band had cruelly murdered his relatives, and, at the same time, so injured him that reason had partly fled, but, with the strange cunning so common to the mind distraught, he had followed on the track of the murderers, and as opportunity offered, had slain them one by one, sparing only the chief, whom he had captured and brought into town to exhibit.

With eyes staring wide with wonder, the miners gazed upon the dreaded leader of the most terrible band of ruffians that even that wild Western land had ever seen. And so, the Cats were all destroyed—this, the leader, excepted.

"But, who is he?" the Doctor asked, putting the question that all the crowd were impatient to have answered.

"Go look!"

The Doctor did as he was bidden.

With his knife he cut the fastenings of the mask, revealing the pale but determined features of Cool Desmond.

A murmur of surprise arose on the air, for no one in all the crowd expected to behold the gambler.

"Desmond!" cried the Doctor, in wonder, and then the crowd repeated the name.

"Very much at your service now, fellow-citizens, very much, indeed," the gambler remarked, with the most perfect coolness. "The game has gone against me; this fool has played a lone hand and played it so well that it has caused the death of twelve as good men as ever were banded together, and I, the thirteenth, am

not likely to escape, although I shall probably die on the rope and not by the bullet of this cunning rascal."

At this point the idiot boy who had apparently not been paying attention at all to what the Cat leader had been saying raised his hand abruptly and the sharp crack of a pistol rung out clear.

A convulsive shudder ran through Desmond's stout frame: he could not fall, for he was securely bound to the mule, but his head sunk forward—he was dead! shot through the head as all the rest of the Cat band had been, the bullet entering a little above and in advance of the ear!

"Thirteen killed my father—thirtren have I killed!" he said, and then he walked slowly away, the crowd respectfully dividing and thus giving room to pass.

From that night the idiot boy disappeared, and neither Death Valley nor the town of Juanapolis ever saw him more. What became of him, no one ever knew.

Our veracious tale is told, but a word is due to the reader in regard to the two pilgrims who had entered the valley with such a cloud of mystery hanging over them.

Two sisters were they, by name Conejos—Constantia and Mary, nieces to the ill-fated Conejos who had perished with all his family by the knives of the outlaws.

With their father, who was a man of violent temper, they had resided at a little half-Mexican, half-American town on the upper Rio Grande, and some weeks before the time when we first introduce them to the notice of the reader, Mary Conejos, who was of a flighty and frivolous disposition, became involved in a love affair.

The girls, utterly alone and friendless, determined upon flight—Mary disguising herself as a boy to avoid detection and pursuit.

They had wandered by chance into the very valley where their kinsman and his family had met their bloody fate. On the trail they had met their idiot cousin, and he, recognizing the girls by their family likeness to his own sisters, remembering their terrible fate, first warned them away and then constituted himself a guardian angel to watch over them, and so had saved them from the outlaws.

Of the supposed buried gold-dust of her uncle, Constantia had not the slightest knowledge; and the treasures have never yet been discovered, although many have searched amid the old ruins.

The destruction of the Cat band was a good thing for the valley, and no one regretted their violent ends.

Old Lauderdale and his daughter soon moved away, going no one knew where; the half-breed could not bear to stay in the valley where her lover had perished.

In due course of time Shannon told his soft tale, his love was returned, and Constantia never regretted her choice.

The desperado was suitably buried in a lonely spot amid the hills where the wild pines sing ever a mournful chant over the remains of Cool Desmond.

THE END.

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